FOREWORD BY TERRY JONES

NOBODY EXPECTS THE SPANISH INQUISITION

Cultural Contexts in Monty Python

EDITED BY TOMASZ DOBROGOSZCZ

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But remember, if you’ve enjoyed reading this book just half as much as we’ve enjoyed writing it, then we’ve enjoyed it twice as much as you.

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The chapter by Katarzyna Małecka is a greatly revised and expanded version of the article that originally appeared in Studia Neofilologiczne VII (2011) under the title "'Oh . . . and Jenkins . . . apparently your mother died this morning': Monty Python's Meaning of Death."

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Lastly, Prof. B. S. Gumby would like to express his most spontaneous and frank imbecility.

*

All quotations from Monty Python's Flying Circus are taken from the book The Complete Monty Python's Flying Circus: All the Words, vol. 1 and vol. 2 (London: Methuen 1990). The references in parentheses use volume number, followed by page number (e.g., 1.123 is vol.1, page 123). All italicized parts in quotations are action description and appear in this form in the scripts book.

The DVD version used for reference in this book is: Monty Python's Flying Circus. The Complete Box Set. Dir. Ian McNaughton. Perf. Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin. 1969–1974. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008.

All quotations from Monty Python feature films are taken from their DVD versions, with further assistance of the Internet site www.montypython.net (perhaps the most reliable and comprehensive site featuring Monty Python scripts).

The DVD versions of feature films used for reference in this book are:

Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Dir. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones. Perf. Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin. 1974. Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2003.

Monty Python's Life of Brian. Dir. Terry Jones. Perf. Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin. 1979. The Criterion Collection, 1999.

Monty Python's The Meaning of Life. Dir. Terry Jones. Perf. Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin. 1983. Universal Studios Home Video, 1997.

All quotations from the German television show Monty Python Fliegender Zirkus are taken from the DVD version: Monty Python's Fliegender Zirkus. Dir. Ian McNaughton. Perf. Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Michael Palin. 1971–72. Rainbow Entertainment, 2002.

The preceding sources are not mentioned in references of particular chapters.

Foreword

I never realized Monty Python was taken so seriously in the academic world, until I learnt of the Monty Python Conference taking place in Łódź (pronounced, I believe, “Wodge”) in Poland, 28–29th October 2010. These chapters are the residue of that conference, and I must say I find them fascinating! Well I would, wouldn’t I? It’s all about what I, and a few friends, were doing in our late twenties and thirties. And we still remain friends, after all this time—doing nothing together for over thirty years. Maybe that’s why we’re still friends.

I have to confess to having a terrible memory. So it’s really great to be referred back to some of the things we’ve done in the past—like Edyta Lorek-Jezińska’s “The Corpse and Cannibalism in Monty Python’s Flying Circus Sketches”—I’d totally forgotten about the life-boat sketch (“I’d rather eat Johnson”). Or Eric Idle playing with the Bonzo Dog Do Da Band in Do Not Adjust Your Set in Richard Mills’ “Eric Idle and the Counter-Culture.” I’d also totally forgotten that. And where else can you find Monty Python sketches referenced to Bakhtin, Foucault, Freud, Shakespeare, and Swift?

Katarzyna Małecka, in “Death and the Denial of Death in the Works of Monty Python,” starts from the premise that psychologists claim that we tend to deny the reality of our own death, “but can conceive our neighbor’s death, . . . [which] only supports our unconscious belief in our own immortality and allows us—in the privacy and secrecy of our unconscious mind—to rejoice that it is ‘the next guy, not me.’” She concludes: “Thus, being struck on the head with a large axe while trying ‘to recite the Bible in one second’ and being able to say only ‘In the . . .’ is not as far-fetched as it may seem, reminding us yet again that the beginning and end might be nearer each other than we expect.” She obviously has a sense of humor.

There are real insights too in this book. Katarzyna Poloczek, writing about “The Representation of the Woman’s Body in

Monty Python's Meaning of Life," claims: "It is argued here that despite the seemingly surreal content, the aforementioned film [The Meaning of Life] aptly addresses vital gender issues, frequently exhibiting a poignant critique of patriarchal society." And you know, it does! When I started the chapter I was afraid that she was going to tear us to shreds. But, of course, in the childbirth scene at the start of the film "the experience of childbirth is depicted as a purely medical procedure, controlled entirely by male doctors, the role of a woman in labor is made virtually redundant." I guess we knew what we were writing about when we wrote it, but I don't think we knew that if "the Pythons had employed one of their own group members to act out the scene, its mock-documentary 'realism' would be destroyed, as the audience's attention would be focused on the male performer, and not on the surrounding milieu." We just did it instinctively.

Stephen Butler and Wojciech Klepuszewski, in their chapter "Monty Python and the Flying Feast of Fools," link the bishop sketch, where the bishop becomes an avengers-type hero, to the subverted role of the bishop in the Feast of Fools, "where the Bishop, would be replaced by a Bishop of Fools, usually a child elected by the congregation." They conclude: "The irony of this skit is that the Pythons themselves would face an equally threatening bishop, the Bishop of Southwark, ten years later in a television debate on the blasphemy of The Life of Brian." Things I'd never connected before. They conclude: "Rather than seek to transform the existing order, the Feast's job was to ensure that the hierarchies would remain in place. Whether the same is true of Python's comedy is difficult to state with any degree of certainty, mainly due to the conflicting statements of each of the members." And it's true. I think that we just jumped onto the bandwagon of critiquing authority, which was all the rage in the late sixties. I don't think we ever thought our little show was going to alter things, but I do think Monty Python was a synthesis of all our ideas.

Justyna Stępień claims that the "TV programs contain well-used patterns which viewers would never normally recognize as kitsch" and goes on to prove that "the retro-kitsch used by the

kitsch" and goes on to prove that "the retro kitsch used by the group infiltrates the cultural industry, wrecking it from the inside."

Miguel Ángel González Campos, in his chapter "Shakespeare, Monty Python, and the Tradition of the Wise Fool," says: "One of the most striking features of Monty Python was their ability to blur the boundaries between high and low culture." A point made equally forcefully by Richard Mills in "Eric Idle and the Counter-Culture."

Adam Sumera tackles The Unique German Show. I well remember making it and the first shot, in which Mike Palin had to play an Australian speaking German. How he did it I'll never know. It was great fun but I don't know whether anybody could understand our German (apart from Cleese's and Mike's). The next show we did in English and they dubbed us or subtitled it.

Tomasz Dobrogoszcz points out in his chapter, "The Village Idiot and His Relation to the Unconscious," "madness remains one of the most frequent objects of ridicule in Monty Python's Flying Circus"—a thing I'd never noticed before. But it's true. The Gumbies, Ideal Loon Exhibition, Ron Obvious—madness is a target—although I think we felt sympathetic towards madness—after all we were doing things that seemed mad to others. And in "The British Look Abroad: Monty Python and the Foreign" he takes on the "otherness" of foreigners in the shows.

But Kevin Kern in "Portrayals of American Culture in the Work of Monty Python" warns us that we can go too far in analysis: "it is perhaps an occupational hazard of academics to overanalyze whatever they study, and this is certainly true of cultural analyses like this. While one can easily discern cultural influences on—and specific satirical intent in—the work of Monty Python, it is also possible to overdo it and ascribe significance to things that perhaps do not warrant it. One must not lose sight of the fact that the primary driving impetus behind the series was no more complicated than its writers' desire to be silly and make people laugh by any means necessary." I think that's a good warning before we all take ourselves too seriously.

But what I really like about this book is that it takes itself seriously and still retains its sense of humor. Which is possibly

the most difficult thing to do in the world.

Terry Jones

Part I
Monty Python’s Body and Death

Chapter 1
“It’s a Mr. Death or Something. He Has Come about the Reaping. I Don’t Think We Need Any at the Moment”

Katarzyna Małecka

Death and the Denial of Death in the Works of Monty Python

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning classic The Denial of Death, Ernest Becker examines and references the works of psychologists, sociologists, and existentialists regarding the human condition and the fear of death. Becker’s significant research and analyses stress that all human traumas, anxieties, and even a majority of mental illnesses have their roots in an existential paradox that rules human life. Man is “a symbolic self, a creature with a name, . . . a creator with a mind that soars out to speculate about atoms and infinity,” and, at the same time, he is “a worm and food for worms” (Becker 26). Because “it is a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with,” and “a full apprehension of man’s condition would [quite literally] drive him insane” (Becker 26–27), man developed the ability “to deny and overcome his grotesque fate” by means which, ironically, are to a certain extent mad as well:

> Who wants to face up fully to the creatures we are, clawing and gasping for breath in a universe beyond our ken? . . . [Man] literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness—agreed madness, shared madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same. (Becker 27)

Thus, to put it more bluntly, an impressive number of Facebook friends, the ever increasing number of tweets per day or a week, a schedule packed with work duties, gym visits, shopping, and other more or less meaningful activities are just "mad" attempts to remove man's existential paradox as far away from him as possible. We shop for food in order not to die of hunger but when we shop this is not the premise we consciously acknowledge—if we did we would seldom overshop. Because we are largely unprepared to grasp the full impact of the human condition, when we finally get a glimpse of our mortal self we are often at a loss. As Terry Eagleton observes, "My death is my death, already secreted in my bones, stealthily at work in my body; yet it leaps upon my life and extinguishes it as though from some other dimension. It is always untimely" (167). Yet, even if we, "the precious custodians of meaning," give voice to the biological aspects of life and peek at mortality in order to handle the awareness of it, our existence does not become "more ontologically solid" (Eagleton 162). "[A] natural event like death," Eagleton states, "can be signified in a myriad cultural styles. But we die anyway. Death represents Nature's final victory over culture" (163).

Taking into account that death is a principal organizer of life and of much of our psychological experience, even though we keep this fact at bay not to go insane, and that regardless of how we handle, portray, and rationalize mortality, man's body still "bleeds and will decay and die" (Becker 26), it is only natural that one of the most intelligent, culturally significant, and utterly absurd TV series in the history of British television should open with progressively wacky images of annihilation and a sketch about "some famous deaths" (1.1). After the unforgettable opening sequence, where a man's head sprouting flowers gets crushed by the now-famous giant foot, a woman in cabaret gear makes her head explode in a grenade-like fashion and a Cardinal Richelieu figure gets squashed by a falling angel, the audience is greeted by a smiling, grey-suited announcer who sits behind a desk only to get up promptly when "a squeal as of a pig being sat upon" can be heard (1.1). We cut to a

blackboard with several lines of pigs drawn on it and a hand with a piece of chalk crosses out one of the pigs. Next, the tallest Mozart in history (John Cleese) welcomes us to the show that looks at some famous deaths:

> Tonight we start with the wonderful death of Genghis Khan, conqueror of India. Take it away Genghis. Cut to Genghis Khan's tent. Genghis strides purposefully. Indian-style background music. Suddenly the music cuts out and Genghis Khan with a squawk throws himself in the air and lands on his back. [Cut to] judges [holding up] cards with points on, in the manner of ice skating judges. (1.1)

Genghis Khan scores 28.1, apparently not an impressive result, as Mozart comments with a wide grin: "Bad luck Genghis. Nice to have you on the show. And now here are the scores" (1.1). The scoreboard includes seven historical figures: St Stephen in the lead with his stoning, followed by Richard the Third's grand death at Bosworth Field, and Genghis, grand warrior as he was, is only number six. The sketch continues with Mozart introducing us to "this week's request death of Mr Bruce Foster of Guildford" (1.2), who dies in his armchair as unspectacularly as Genghis. At the end, "one of the evergreen bucket kickers," Admiral Nelson, flies out of a window with a scream "Kiss me, Hardy!" (1.2).

And now for the thesis statement: The opening sketch of Monty Python's Flying Circus series signals several issues this chapter will also attempt to address: first, death, the great annihilator, proves as always artistically prolific and limitless in its range (the opening sketch supports this part of the thesis); second, death in all shapes and degrees is featured in the Pythons' creative output and to what purpose it remains to be seen; third, the recurring theme of death and animals serves an additional and noble purpose in the Pythons' works; fourth, the denial of death is as problematic and dangerous as the overeager acceptance of it; fifth, one of the best ways to address the absurdity and necessity of death might be through

singing. Apart from these five stages of dealing with death, the famous deaths sketch also mocks, among other things, everything this analysis and many other cultural creations intend to do. Just like the judges rating famous deaths in the manner of an ice skating competition, humans, in their need to feel secure, love to categorize, compartmentalize, commodify, classify, rate, and theorize, which is something the reality of death does not easily comply with. Mozart's artificial smile and smooth yet completely ridiculous announcements only emphasize death's randomness, unexpectedness, cruelty, and chaos, characteristics that only a healthy dose of humor and acknowledgment can possibly help us handle but not necessarily make sense of.

And now for something quite alike: various ways to die according to Monty Python and what they add to the meaning of death. Both the Pythons' TV series and feature films present multiple methods of becoming bereft of life, among which are: a) rather probable causes of death: for instance, being shot in war while trying to present one's commanding officer with multiple clocks and watches instead of hiding in the trenches; being squashed by a sixteen-ton weight, or other heavy objects (multiple episodes); dying while donating organs; being poisoned by salmon mousse; crucifixion; or quitting the rat race by throwing oneself out of a window; b) less probable causes: dying while donating organs on the table in one's own home; being struck on the head with a large axe while trying to recite the Bible in one second; exploding, since "[e]xploding is a perfectly normal, medical phenomenon [and] [i]n many fields of medicine nowadays, a dose of dynamite can do a world of good" (2.65); falling apart while coughing; or being thrown out of a window due to being an unsuccessful encyclopedia salesman; and c) totally absurd although not entirely improbable causes: the aforementioned annihilation by a giant foot; being swallowed by a fish with a swastika on its side; being shot with an arrow by an enraged pantomime goose; or being torn to bloody shreds by the legendary Killer Rabbit.

This, of course, is just an insignificant selection of

interesting deaths according to the Pythons. Regardless of what way we choose to rate or classify them, one thing remains certain: death has many faces and while some of them still remain hidden to us, the ones the Pythons offer may serve as a postmodern memento mori, which, while absurd and entertaining, seriously testifies to the reality of death. The more improbable the cause of death, the more likely our sense of illusory security and the stronger our tendency to ignore death's omnipresence and feel invincible. Through piling one absurd death on top of another (in episode 11, in the "Agatha Christie sketch," framed by sketches featuring undertakers, the piling up of deaths is representative of the overall Pythonesque technique), the Pythons poke fun at how easily we take in violent deaths from multiple sources and, at the same time, how untouched we remain by death's true horror, the result of which is frequently manifested in increasing insensitivity and dehumanization. Psychologists claim that we tend to deny the reality of our own death, "but can conceive our neighbor's death, . . . [which] only supports our unconscious belief in our own immortality and allows us—in the privacy and secrecy of our unconscious mind—to rejoice that it is 'the next guy, not me'" (Kübler-Ross 28). The irrationality of most deaths featured in the Pythons' work shows how unbound our imagination can be when it comes to conceiving and assimilating the demise of others, often in order to feed "our infantile wish for omnipotence and immortality" (Kübler-Ross 28). It is more than coincidence that many sketches and scenes in Monty Python's Flying Circus feature the army, soldiers, war, violence, and horror. Critical of many "ridiculous and dangerous social distractions that dehumanize us" (Asma 94), the Pythons expose the absurd human predilection to witness and cause gratuitous violence and senseless annihilation on a local and global scale, the epitome of which is the killer joke sketch, significantly featured at the end of their first episode, which begins with the aforementioned famous deaths sketch. Most of the individual destructive behavior that allows one to constantly shun one's own mortality, yet easily abide and/or cause the death and

suffering of others, stems from the lack of an overall social "ability to face death with acceptance and dignity" (Kübler-Ross 28).

Obviously, no amount of serious psychological argument makes the absurd deaths in the Pythons' work less ingeniously twisted and hilarious. But here is the rub: they still testify to death's omnipresence and unpredictability in a very real and grim way. One might not get annihilated by a killer sheep, but death by a trapped snake coiling itself around the shotgun and pressing the trigger with its thrashing tail is apparently an option, which one Iranian hunter experienced in 1990 while pressing a gun butt behind his killer's head (John 13). Thus, "being struck on the head with a large axe" while trying "to recite the entire Bible in one second" and being able to say only "In the . . ." (1.142) is not as far-fetched as it may seem, reminding us yet again that the beginning and end might be nearer each other than we expect.

"Humans throughout history have enjoyed a relationship with animals—sometimes symbiotic, sometimes fatal" (John 9). In The World's Stupidest Deaths, Andrew John and Stephen Blake give several gripping examples of human deaths caused directly or indirectly by various animals and resulting, more often than not, from man's stupidity and/or cruelty. For instance, in 2003 in the Philippines, "a seasoned cock owner . . . had failed to wear any protective clothing" while preparing his trained bird for a fight and, as a result, died of multiple wounds delivered to his groin by the vicious cock (John 12). In those of us who try to avoid violence in everyday life and do not enjoy exploiting animals for fun, this lethal accident may evoke little sympathy. Yet, the case of the unfortunate Philippine cock owner also testifies to general human recklessness when it comes to danger and death. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross points out that such thoughtless or daredevil behavior is often a common defense mechanism in dealing with the fear of death—"if we cannot [successfully] deny death we may attempt to [challenge] and master it" by racing on highways (27), taking up extreme sports or, for that matter, preparing a fight-hungry cock for a

fight without wearing a proper genitalia guard. The frequent pairing of animals and death in the Pythons' work is another reflection of the uneasy and dysfunctional relationship between humans and mortality. At first glance, a killer sheep, a killer rabbit, or a killer pantomime goose may seem preposterous, an affront to these particular creatures' instincts and our own expectations. The absurdity of cuddly killer creatures could, of course, be read as a classic projection of human killer instincts and cruelty towards both men and beasts. Although death and cruelty have always been present in nature, only humans have created the institution of war for purposes other than survival. Technology and science have given us "the possibility of a life of comfort, free from hunger and cold, and free from the constant threat of infectious disease," but, at the same time, they have "given us the power to destroy civilization through thermonuclear war, as well as the power to make our planet uninhabitable through pollution and overpopulation" (Avery). Ironically, instead of making us also better equipped to deal with death anxiety, our inventiveness and unmatched intelligence have mostly managed to intensify the awareness of the possibility of being annihilated, which, in turn, has resulted in an increasing fear of death and, as a consequence, in more and more elaborate ways of defending ourselves against extinction (Kübler-Ross 25–27). The Pythons' animal sketches hint at and mock how, in the name of progress, humans often tend to escalate violence at the cost of other creatures' well-being and how double-edged this progress can eventually become when it comes to dealing with death. A killer sheep might as well be the result of an unfortunate genetic experiment that meant to help humans live longer but eventually backfired. By highlighting the absurdity of the situations they portray, the sketches featuring animals and different aspects of death help us rediscover that our humanness largely relies on mortality, the feature we share with all other living creatures, and that it is high time we realized the limits of what can be done to conquer death without devastating side effects.

Of course, science and technology have also influenced the lives of animals in a more mundane way, a way from which most of us benefit on a regular basis, unaware of the violence that accompanies it. Apart from weapons of mass destruction, humans have also invented and perfected complex machines to kill, chop, mince, and prepare other living species for consumption. In the second series of the Flying Circus, in the "Architect sketch" (episode 17), two prospective architects for designing an apartment complex outline their plans to two investors (Palin and Jones) who are to fund the project. The first architect, Mr. Wiggin of Ironside and Malone (Cleese), specializes in rather unconventional buildings that drastically exceed the everyday needs of an average tenant:

> Good morning, gentlemen. This is a twelve-storey block combining classical neo-Georgian features with all the efficiency of modern techniques. The tenants arrive in the entrance hall here, are carried along the corridor on a conveyor belt in extreme comfort and past murals depicting Mediterranean scenes, towards the rotating knives. The last twenty feet of the corridor are heavily soundproofed. The blood pours down these chutes and the mangled flesh slurps into these. (1.220)

Slightly surprised, yet not actually concerned, the investors interrupt the presentation and one of them asks politely: "Are you proposing to slaughter our tenants?" to which the abattoir expert replies in a professional manner: "Does that not fit in with your plans?" (1.220). The businessmen admit that they just "wanted a simple block of flats," which slightly disappoints Mr. Wiggin:

> Oh, I see. I hadn't correctly divined your attitude towards your tenants. You see I mainly design slaughter houses. Yes, pity. Mind you, this is a real beauty. I mean, none of your blood caked on the walls and flesh flying out of the windows, inconveniencing the passers-by with this one. I mean, my life has been building up to this. (1.221)

Like many Flying Circus sketches, this one also works through inversion, which, in its simplicity, speaks volumes about the anthropocentric nature of Western cultures. The very idea that aesthetically pleasing murals and efficient modern techniques can change a slaughter house into a less horrifying place is as absurd as the “Architect sketch.” Behind all the animal flesh served on our plates stands death, and even the fastest rotating knives in the world do not make such death nonviolent. And yet, it is more convenient to live in oblivion because the image of “blood caked on the walls and flesh flying out of the windows” may spoil the appetites of some or make one think about death, which is not a suitable subject for a dining table conversation. Humans find it hard to “correctly divine” how inconvenient their lives would be were it not for other creatures that make everyday existence possible. Although this might not be the primary message of the “Architect sketch,” one of the reasons why we laugh at the suggestion that an apartment building with all the advantages of an abattoir could be an appropriate form of accommodation is our conviction that such a reversal of fortune is impossible—we cannot die, especially in such a drastic way, just to become food for other species. It is inconceivable because death is predominantly removed from everyday life and nicely packaged in processing plants and modern funeral homes. And yet, we do die in various ways, often horrifying and without “murals depicting Mediterranean scenes” in vicinity, and we always become food for other creatures in the end.

An even more vivid example of human inventiveness regarding processing animals for food can be found in the final episode of the first series of Flying Circus, which ominously opens with four undertakers carrying a coffin with the “It’s” man inside. Next, in the sketch intriguingly titled in the script as “Restaurant (abuse/cannibalism),” the head waiter (Palin) welcomes a married couple (Cleese and Idle) to a vegetarian restaurant:

This is a vegetarian restaurant only, we serve no animal

> flesh of any kind. We're not only proud about that, we're smug about it. So if you were to come in here asking me to rip open a small defenceless chicken, so you could chew its skin and eat its intestines, then I'm afraid I'd have to ask you to leave. . . . Likewise if you were to ask us to slice the sides of a cow and serve it with small pieces of its liver . . . or indeed drain the life blood from a pig before cutting off one of its legs . . . or carve the living giblets from a sheep and serve them with the fresh brains, bowels, guts and spleen of a small rabbit. . . . WE WOULDN'T DO IT. Not for food anyway. (1.164–165)

As he delivers this tirade, the waiter raises his voice and becomes oddly excited, indicating that such painstaking ways of preparing animal flesh for restaurant customers are not foreign to him, as the final comment confirms. On the one hand, the sketch seems to mock the rants of vegetarian activists, but on the other, it clearly hints at a certain bestiality of the bloody methods by which humans process animals for consumption, methods that many take for granted and never care to question. Yet, when it comes to the disintegration of our own bowels, guts, and spleen, most humans take ridiculous precautions to keep their bodies as intact as possible, preferably forever. We swiftly and dispassionately dispose of a sat-upon pig, but when faced with swine flu or other lethal health threats, the indifference is immediately replaced with fear and panic, caused by a sudden discovery of our ephemerality and mortality. As Ernest Becker observes, "there is nothing like shocks in the real world to jar loose repressions" that guard man's "status of a small god" against his perishable self (21, 26).

Another reminder of how we are conveniently unaware of the other side of the coin comes near the end of the "Restaurant" sketch, where the roles of humans and animals are reversed even more prominently than in the "Architect sketch." Terry Jones' half-naked character enters, pushed on a large serving dish with an apple in his mouth, which he promptly takes out to announce to the married couple: "I hope you're going to enjoy me this evening. I'm the special. Try me

you're going to enjoy me this evening. I'm the special. Try me with some rice" (1.166). When the husband wants to greet "the special," Jones slaps him on the hand and quips: "Don't play with your food" (1.166). Indeed, don't play with your food because it has come at a price which sooner or later we all have to pay. In the midst of life, we are indeed in death, as much our own as that of other creatures, and yet, just as we prefer to remain ignorant in the case of slaughtered animals, unless a deranged waiter rubs the gory details into our faces, our own end also remains an issue that we are seldom prepared to consider ahead of time, which is why so many of us exit this world with a rebellious scream rather than a short squeal.

After a short intermission, the restaurant sketch is followed by a brief sketch at a cinema where "a man [Cleese] in an ice-cream girl's uniform is standing in a spotlight with an ice-cream tray with [a dead] albatross on it," announcing loudly: "Albatross! Albatross! Albatross!" (1.167). Cleese's character looks nothing like Coleridge's "bright-eyed Mariner" (Coleridge 20), but selling an albatross lying in the middle of an ice-cream tray hints at the famous ballad whose protagonist has a close encounter with death due to the reckless killing of the harmless bird. The poem's moral "He prayeth best, who loveth best All things both great and small" (Coleridge 614–615) could serve as part of a punch line to the point being made here. While eating animal flesh, one should pause and consider the sacrifice our fellow creatures make for us, a healthy reminder that our own bodies are perishable and, generally, far less useful after death. Yeats said, "Nor dread nor hope attend A dying animal; A man awaits his end Dreading and hoping all" (1–4). Animals live with death much more naturally than humans do, which is also a lesson the Pythons imply in their many sketches featuring animals. While a cuddly killer bunny or a lethal pantomime goose are hysterically funny in their unnatural behavior, they also, quite seriously, comment on the absurdity of human disrespect for natural order, reflected, among other things, in an unwillingness to acknowledge mortality while freely dealing death to others. Becker points out that the human animal is the most tragic of all animals because "the knowledge of death is

reflective and conceptual, and, [unlike humans], animals are spared it. They live and they disappear with the same thoughtlessness: a few minutes of fear, a few seconds of anguish, and it is over" (27). While this is a valid observation, it needs to be stressed that the human animal is additionally pathetic and thoughtless because it seldom acts constructively upon this knowledge of death that singles it out and gives it dominance over other creatures. Cleese's character in drag with a dead bird on a tray and his mindless repetition of the word "albatross" seems to be an apt metaphor for the awkwardness and helplessness with which humans handle the issue of death. Jones' flesh-baring man served on a tray—"the special"—is as funny as he is vulnerable, hinting at our tragic fate which we share with animals but choose to ignore with a smile because we feel "special."

The human need to sugar-coat the reality of death is succinctly rendered in episode six of the first Flying Circus series, in which a proud manufacturer of "frog" chocolates boasts to two representatives of the hygiene squad about the freshness and crunchiness of the product's filling, stating that his company uses "only the finest baby frogs, dew picked and flown from Iraq, cleansed in finest quality spring water, lightly killed, and then sealed in a succulent Swiss quintuple smooth treble cream milk chocolate envelope and lovingly frosted with glucose" (1.72). As in most good comedy genres, here too, the laughter helps bring to light the vices of man, vices that could be avoided if we dared keep death in mind more often. Terry Eagleton rightly points out that were humans more capable of acknowledging their own limitations, there would be less animosity in the world:

> [I]f we really could keep death in mind, we would almost certainly behave a good deal more virtuously than we do. If we lived permanently at the point of death, it would presumably be easier to forgive our enemies [and] repair our relationships. . . . It is partly the illusion that we will live forever which prevents us from doing these things. (210–211)

211).

The prospect of having to die shapes our lives, be it consciously or unconsciously. This knowledge underpins our complex fears, rituals, and responses to death, one of which is our difficulty in addressing death openly in ways that involve more than only fixed phrases, euphemisms, or media images. The Pythons mock this weakness in several sketches. Episode thirty of the Flying Circus opens with a "[s]tock colour film of vivid explosive action for fifteen seconds: dog fight RAF style; trains crashing; Spanish hotel blowing up; car crashing and exploding; train on collapsing bridge; volcano erupting; Torrey Canyon burning; forest fire blazing" (2.91). From this a caption with four individual words zooms into focus: "BLOOD, DEATH, WAR, HORROR" and "we cut to an interviewer in a rather dinky little set" with the words "Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror" displayed on "a rather prettily done sign" in the background (2.91). After briefly welcoming us to "another edition of 'Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror'," the interviewer (Palin) announces: "and later on we'll be talking to a man who does gardening. But our first guest in the studio tonight is a man who talks entirely in anagrams" (2.91). Needless to say, the words in the program's title are never mentioned again. The meaningless triple repetition of the caption "Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror" leads to an equally pointless conversation between the interviewer and the man who talks entirely in anagrams, most of which are hardly typical anagrams and none of which makes any sense. The disparity between the program's title and its content is amusing as much as it is alarming. The block capital letters of the opening words not only imply but clearly state that death is a fact—as does the rest of the footage—yet we often choose to talk about mortality in linguistically inadequate terms, some of which easily measure up to the preposterousness of the anagrams in the sketch. Paradoxically, although various media representations of death fill our lives daily, mortality as such is rarely discussed in a socially and psychologically constructive way. And yet, our inability to coherently converse about death

does not impair our obsessional need to witness the deaths of others via mass media. In fact, it so often happens that the greater our fear of death, the greater our fascination with it. Highlighting the main points of psychoanalytic criticism regarding the fear of death, Lois Tyson observes:

> [T]he greater the role that death work plays in our psychological being, the greater our attraction, despite the horror that accompanies it, to death in all its forms: we can't see too many violent movies or docudramas about natural disasters; we can't keep our eyes off the roadside car wreck; we can't see too many news reports about child abuse, rape and AIDS; we can't see too many made-for-television movies about people who kill their spouses or their lovers' spouses. . . . Our fascination with media representations of death and death work is another example of how we project our fears and problems onto people and events outside ourselves. (26)

This mediated acknowledgment of death, however, leaves the overall denial and fear of death unaddressed, just as it is in the Pythons' sketch. The Pythons put aside the gory entertainment just like the viewers put aside the thoughts of their own mortality while watching programs exploiting various atrocities. By not talking about "Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror," the sketch mocks not only such programs, but also our expectations raised by the sketch's sensational title. Whether such double stress on the lack of actual death acknowledgment will result in a more balanced approach to one's own mortality greatly depends on the viewer. Yet, the fact that in the "Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror" sketch death in multiple shapes remains safely sealed in the alarming caption behind the presenter draws one's attention to the inconsistency between the program's title and its content and may trigger an individual analysis of why such an inappropriate clash would make us laugh to begin with.

The "Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror" sketch is also remarkable because it perfectly renders what Ernest

Becker terms “an impossible paradox” of human life (17). In order to survive in the world, we are equipped with the instinct of self-preservation, which exists solely because of “the ever-present fear of death,” which, in turn, is mostly blocked from our “mental functioning” so that we do not go insane (Becker 16–17). Yet, in contrast to animals, which also have instincts to preserve themselves, we happen to see the world as overwhelming and chaotic from time to time because of our reflective and conceptual cognitive abilities, which allow us to realize that our “individuality” functions “within finitude” (Becker 26–27). In other words, in spite of our ability to self-preserve ourselves from everyday harms and dangers, we get vivid glimpses of the fact that it is not possible to remove death, the ultimate danger, from our life forever. Consequently, Becker states, “like Montaigne’s peasant [who] isn’t troubled until the very end, when the Angel of Death, who has always been sitting on his shoulder, extends his wings,” most people choose oblivion rooted in “a style of life that has elements of real madness” to protect themselves from too much death awareness (23–24). The Pythons’ sketch removes the dire footage and alarming caption into the background, as the instinct of self-preservation dictates, yet death remains present, both through the repetition of the title and on the sign in the background. In the meantime, the absurd anagrams allude to the chaos of everyday life and mad attempts to block the reality of one’s own death through, for instance, watching shows about someone else’s misfortune.

In his study on death and humor, Allen Klein points out that while “there is nothing funny about death itself,” especially when it involves suffering, there is plenty of humor in situations “surrounding . . . death and lingering loss,” the most common examples of which are various “euphemistic substitutes for death” we use, such as, “met his end (Was the deceased double-jointed?)” or “answered the call of the unknown (Salespeople phoning again?)” (10). The Pythons have coined and gathered their own collection of circumlocutory phrases for death and dying in “Decomposing Composers,” a song first

released on their 1980 Monty Python's Contractual Obligation Album, and in the unforgettable "Dead arrot" sketch. "Decomposing Composers" lists famous composers and matches each of them with a different euphemistic phrase for their current, nonviable state. Thus, "Mozart don't go shopping no more," "Elgar doesn't answer the door," "There's very little of [Schubert and Chopin] left to see" and "You can still hear Beethoven / But Beethoven cannot hear you" (Palin). The decomposing composers definitely have "no fun anymore" (Palin), and yet their "music lives on," providing not only unending aesthetic satisfaction to lovers of classical music but also an excellent opportunity for the Pythons to mock the human tendency to avoid direct references to death. The realization that sooner or later, like Mozart, all of us will not "go shopping no more" does evoke at least a chuckle and, hopefully, can make the unpleasant subject of death more open for discussion. The "Dead parrot" sketch (episode 8) also uses euphemisms to ridicule death denial. An annoyed customer Mr. Praline (Cleese) and a pet store owner (Palin) argue over the vital state of an undeniably dead "Norwegian Blue" parrot, which, according to the shopkeeper, is "just resting" or simply "prefers kipping on its back" (1.104–105). Death denial is mocked through a reversed process here: Praline actually calls death by its name ("It's stone dead," "That parrot is definitely deceased"), but the pet shop owner, reluctant to refund his money, tries to convince him otherwise and claims that the bird is merely "stunned," forcing Praline to resort to a torrent of euphemisms ranging from the simple "This parrot is no more!" to the more sophisticated: "It's rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible" (1.104–105). Unlike the "Blood, Devastation, Death, War and Horror" sketch, the "Dead parrot" dialogue has death at its center, but the shop owner is able to grasp the reality of the parrot's death only through more descriptive references, alluding to the general human inclination to talk about death in euphemisms. What makes the sketch an additionally apt comment on the tendency to ignore the awkward topic of mortality in everyday situations is the fact that

Praline originally purchased the bird dead, allowing himself to be assured that “its total lack of movement was due to it being tired and shagged out after a long squawk,” while in fact “the only reason that the parrot had been sitting on its perch in the first place was that it had been nailed there” (1.105). The stiff creature in question is of equal importance here: first, the successful sale of the ex-parrot proves that death might be awkward to mention but is extremely marketable (the death and devastation in the media referred to earlier); second, the bird becomes the object of an absurd refund hassle, as if any satisfactory reimbursement were possible in the case of death; and third, parrots, being tropical birds, do not come from Scandinavia, so the Norwegian Blue is a truly “remarkable bird” as it is nonexistent. Apart from the general human reluctance to seriously deal with death, the multilayered absurdity of the sketch confirms Terry Eagleton’s observations: even if we finally muster our courage and verbal resources to define, expose, discuss, and name death, this does not make nonbeing an easy commodity to handle because, by definition, nonexistence eludes being grasped (213, 215, 217).

Part VII of Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life, titled “Death,” also comments on the pointlessness of both death denial and efforts to discuss and argue about mortality, especially when it is done to culturally and socially tame it rather than accept one’s own natural finitude. When the traditional figure of Death with a scythe appears at the door of a middle-class country house, the host fails to recognize Him for who He is and treats Him as a mere inconvenience, as someone who, unscheduled, has come to trim the hedge. More gracious, the hostess invites Death in, offers Him a drink and introduces Mr. Death to the rest of the company. It takes Mr. Death a while to get across the message about who He actually is. Even when He demonstrates His otherworldliness by walking through the table, both the hosts and the guests pause only for a moment and then, “delighted,” tell Death that this is “a unique experience” and that they “were just talking about death only five minutes ago,” wondering “whether death is really the end .

. . or whether there is . . . and one so hates to use words like ‘soul’ or ‘spirit.’” One guest, Debbie from Philadelphia (Palin), asks Mr. Death directly about an afterlife, a question that Death, flabbergasted, ignores, instead bluntly announcing, “I have come for you.” After Debbie glibly challenges Mr. Death about the impossibility of all of them dying at the same time, Death indicates the cause by pointing to the salmon mousse and, quite casually, orders everyone to follow Him, to which the host reacts by grabbing a gun and shooting the Grim Reaper. The attempt to get rid of Mr. Death is obviously futile, and the frightened host hurriedly apologizes, “Just testing, sorry.” Whether treated with politeness or hostility, death can be delayed, interrupted, or tamed by talking and theorizing only temporarily, and all efforts to eliminate it from life are invariably bound to fall through. To use Philip Larkin’s words: “Death is no different whined at than withstood” (40). Or, as Eagleton and Praline might have concluded, “we die anyway” (Eagleton 163) and culture “don’t enter into it” (1.104).

Although we are often unable to talk about death on a more down-to-earth level, and when we do, it can prove ineffective, indifference towards or unconditional acceptance of death can be equally detrimental to us and the world around us. Monty Python and The Holy Grail, a brilliant spoof of the legendary King Arthur’s quests and battles, takes on many medieval quirks, including low life-expectancy, the Black Death, the holy crusades, and a morbid obsession with death. The less than healthy atmosphere of vanitas and ars moriendi is satirized in the “Bring out your dead” scene, in which the dead collector refuses to take on his cart a half-dead man not because it is inhumane but because it is “against regulations,” which, however, can be easily sidestepped by hitting the ill man on the head with a club. Such indifference towards death is, of course, yet another means of repressing the fear of death, which conditions our instinct of self-preservation—the sick man is a burden to his family and potentially a carrier of the Black Death, so the animal self in man, which remains hidden in everyday life because it is strictly linked to the demands of the body and,

thus, reminds one of one's own mortality, dictates that the infected individual should be eliminated for the sake of others. The scene perfectly portrays the general squalor, lack of hygiene, and man's misfortunate fate; yet, it still makes us laugh because we think we would never behave like the man in the scene. Culture and society dictate we should take care of the sick and not let them die if there is anything modern medicine can do about it, mostly because if we let someone close to us die we become painfully aware of our own vulnerability. That is also why we often delegate sick family members to hospitals and hospices. They can become a psychological and physical burden, a death reminder, and we just do not have the heart to hit them on the head with a club, so we choose a socially approved method to let them get better or die farther away from us. Of course, the medieval methods of getting rid of the sick are not praiseworthy either, much less the general approach to the value of human life and death during the times of the Black Death:

> There had been rumors about a deadly new epidemic sweeping through the Middle East, probably starting in 1338. The plague had taken hold among the Tartars of Asia Minor. Somebody had to be blamed—in this case, the Christian minority. (Later, as the plague devastated Europe, Jews were not only blamed but burned alive.) The Tartars chased Genoese merchants to their fortified town (now Feodosiya, Ukraine, then Kaffa) on the Crimean coast. The besieging army soon was ravaged by the plague and decided to leave. As a parting shot, the Tartars used catapults to hurl plague-infected corpses over the city walls. Some residents died almost immediately; the others dashed for their galleys . . . and fled, taking the disease with them. [The plague] would spread through almost all of Europe, wiping out entire villages and decimating towns and cities. (Kastenbaum 63)

By comparison, the "Bring out your dead" scene seems mild. Of course, the Middle Ages in general were not the best

period for most Western societies:

> The fourteenth century suffered an entire catalog of catastrophes, including earthquakes, fires, floods, freezing weather, nauseating mists, and crop failures—all of which did not even seem to slow down the incessant warfare and banditry. Social order was weakened under the stress, and a hungry and exhausted population became more vulnerable to influenza and other opportunistic diseases. (Kastenbaum 63)

It is hardly surprising that in such dire circumstances people would live each day as if it were their last and practiced the artes moriendi religiously. While such an approach may seem healthier than the modern omnipresent denial of death, “hurling plague-infected corpses over the city walls,” randomly assigning blame for biological dangers, burning people alive, and disposing of the sick and dead in bulks are nothing else but mere effects of the ever-present fear of death. To quote Becker again, “there is nothing like shocks in the real world to jar loose repressions” and cause “open outbursts of anxiety” and panic (21). The “Bring out your dead” scene captures the indifference towards mortality triggered by the fear of death in a lighthearted and amusing manner, but, as always in the Pythons’ best work, it also lets the viewers see that the human animal has not changed all that much since the Dark Ages.

Another intelligent example of the acceptance of danger and death in The Holy Grail is the song merrily chirped in praise of Brave Sir Robin:

> He was not afraid to die,
> Oh Brave Sir Robin,
> He was not at all afraid to be killed in nasty ways
> Brave, brave, brave, brave Sir Robin.
> He was not in the least bit scared to be mashed into a pulp
> Or to have his eyes gouged out and his elbows broken;
> To have his kneecaps split and his body burned away,
> And his limbs all hacked and mangled, brave Sir Robin.

Of course, no one in their right mind and with healthy survival instincts would bear such atrocities, but, for medieval

survival instincts would bear such atrocities, but, for medieval knights, death was an honor. According to Philippe Ariès, the death of a knight "was regarded by the clergy, as well as by the laity, as the death of a saint" (12). Inspired by religious fervor, cultural ideals/delusions, the bellicose medieval climate and, last but not least, personal greed, medieval knights willingly embarked on many dangerous missions, primarily the Crusades, which, apart from immortality and fame after death, offered "victory and spoils"—"the signs of divine election"—before entering the eternal kingdom (Ariès 194). "Immortality and immorality are closely allied," observes Terry Eagleton in his discussion about death, evil, nonbeing, and religious fundamentalism (211). Medieval indifference in the face of death seems neither healthier nor more logical than the modern denial of death. The brutal ways of inflicting pain and death on Brave Sir Robin are in fact what medieval crusaders inflicted on others. And many Brave Sir Robins, blinded by greed and the promise of immortality, gave as little attention to their own annihilation as to that of others.

Not to lose track of the absolute brilliance and hilariousness of the song about Brave Sir Robin, it has to be added that when it comes to Sir Robin's penis, Sir Robin stops the scop in his paeans. Death is okay but having one's manhood mangled is another matter, since one cannot enter the eternal kingdom without being properly equipped. From a more down-to-earth perspective, the reason why Sir Robin accepts all the other prospective atrocities done to him with stoic bravery and patience but objects to having his most private part threatened is "man's basic narcissism" which hides the terror of death (cf. Becker 2). Elaborating on the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Alfred Adler, Ernest Becker points out,

> One of the key concepts for understanding man's urge to heroism is the idea of "narcissism." . . . If we care about anyone it is usually ourselves first of all. As Aristotle somewhere put it: luck is when the guy next to you gets hit with the arrow. Twenty-five hundred years of history have

> not changed man's basic narcissism; most of the time, for most of us, this is still a workable definition of luck. It is one of the meaner aspects of narcissism that we feel that practically everyone is expendable except ourselves. . . . The thought frightens us; we don't know how we could do it without others—yet at bottom the basic resource is there: we could suffice alone if need be, if we could trust ourselves as Emerson wanted. And if we don't feel this trust emotionally, still most of us would struggle to survive with all our powers, no matter how many around us died. Our organism is ready to fill the world all alone, even if our mind shrinks at the thought. This narcissism is what keeps men marching into point-blank fire in wars: at heart one doesn't feel that he will die, he only feels sorry for the man next to him. Freud's explanation for this was that the unconscious does not know death or time: in man's physiochemical, inner organic recesses he feels immortal. (2)

Narcissism is, of course, strictly connected to self-worth, and, apparently, "what man needs most [in life] is to feel secure in his self-esteem" because only when man's self-esteem is properly grounded and safe can he create things of "lasting worth and meaning" that will "outlive or outshine death and decay" (Becker 3, 5). Thus, Sir Robin's brave sacrifice would make him a hero and a saint and, most importantly, would assure him of his immortality. However, were he to lose his penis in any way, it would not only destroy his physical manhood, but, more than the damage of any other body part, would also prove his mortality and meaninglessness. This is because, according to "the newer understanding of the castration complex" and penis envy, as children we are not primarily threatened by the father but by the mother's body (Becker 38). The mother's body is simultaneously associated with "a secure power to lean on" and with "her secret bodily processes that bind her to nature: the breast with its mysterious sticky milk, the menstrual odors and blood" (Becker 38, 39). The mother is immersed "in stark . . . body-fallibilities" (Becker 30, 39). She "must exude determinism," Becker points out, "and

39). She "must exude determinism," Becker points out, "and the child expresses his horror at his complete dependency on what is physically vulnerable" (39). Thus, it is only natural that Brave Sir Robin, who expects worldly and spiritual rewards in exchange for the mutilation of his body, reacts strongly when his penis is even metaphorically endangered. With his penis threatened, he would lose a physical and psychological connection with the father (his own and God) and would become more susceptible to the biological forces of nature ruled by the terror of death, which, in turn, would make it impossible for him to continue being brave. In other words, Sir Robin's penis is his amulet warding off biology, nature, and death and securely linking him to the symbolic father, who "seems more neutral physically, more cleanly powerful" and "represents the vast world outside of the home, the social world with its organized triumph over nature, the very escape from contingency" that we all seek (Becker 40). The song primarily ridicules the chivalric code and the willingness to sacrifice one's own life for ideals that often ruin thousands of innocent lives. Yet, the lyrics also make it clear that our body is fallible, prone to harm, entropy, decay, and eventual death, and that the only way to achieve immortality is through symbolic social monuments or gestures—in this case through an absurd song.

And speaking about immortality: is there a life after death according to the Pythons? The answer comes in episode thirty-six of the Flying Circus, in which chairman Roger Last (Cleese) gathers three "late" guests in "a late-night religious-type discussion" (2.188). After posing the aforementioned question to the three dead interviewees, one of whom is "the very late Prebendary Reverend Ross," chairman Last faces utter silence and then promptly concludes: "Well there we have it, three say no" (2.188). As far as the general absurdity of most sketches goes, this one is quite unequivocal, and, for a change, the punch line is surprisingly logical.

So what is the meaning of death according to Monty Python? Struggling for a coherent conclusion when it comes to the Pythons is very much like struggling to impose order on the chaos that death causes for all of us. The Pythons would

probably prefer to paraphrase their own words: “Well, [just like the meaning of life, the meaning of death] is nothing special. . . . [T]ry to live in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations” (The Meaning of Life), and, if possible, try to apply the same creed of balance and moderation to death. In the view of psychologists and cultural critics, most suffering in the world stems from the fear of death, which, when acknowledged and handled in a constructive way, can be coined into a lesson for humanity, preventing one from curtly informing another person, in the fashion of the unfeeling boarding school teacher from The Meaning of Life, “Oh . . . and Jenkins . . . apparently your mother died this morning.” While trying to make sense of mortality, it might be difficult to always look on the bright side of life, but one does not have to be morbid to remember that, grim as death might be, it is not a punishment for sins or life’s enemy. In the last scene of Monty Python’s Life of Brian (1979), Brian’s crucified companions teach him a valuable lesson: “life is quite absurd and death’s the final word.” Life is chaotic, haphazard, and unjust (Brian is crucified by mistake); death, on the other hand, becomes the only constant that bears witness to life’s absurdity and, thus, validates it. Like the rest of the movie, the final song is also a critique of the symbol that Christianity regards as helpful in making sense of death, while, in fact, what the cross testifies to is human cruelty and disregard for life. So indeed, as Brian learns on the cross, “Life’s a piece of shit, When you look at it / Life’s a laugh and death’s a joke, it’s true.” And here again the Pythons instinctively offer valuable insight into the human condition. On the final pages of The Denial of Death, Ernest Becker observes that in order to make any sense of our fate, “we need the boldest creative myths, not only to urge men on but also and perhaps especially to help men see the reality of their condition” (280). By “creative myths” Becker does not mean an escape to ideologies, religions or mystical teachings, most of which deny human creatureliness (280). “Creative myths” are primarily inner “human beliefs about reality,” “about human nature, and about what man may yet become” (Becker 278). They “affect people’s real actions [and]

help introduce the new into the world" (Becker 278). Shaping reality takes a lot of effort, and the main condition for this endeavor to work is acceptance of "the dilemmas of the human condition that tragically limit man's efforts" (Becker 278). As Becker points out, "a creative myth is not simply a relapse into comfortable illusion; it has to be as bold as possible in order to be truly generative" (278–279). Thus, even though "life is a piece of shit" and the body's physicality continues to deteriorate as we age, we should boldly keep such limitations in mind because, paradoxically, they may allow us to shape everyday reality with more care and productivity. Apart from "creative myths," no other beliefs have the power to urge us to live our lives consciously. Consequently, "death's a joke" only if we make a real effort to creatively participate in life. Lighthearted and absurd as they may seem on the surface, the Pythons' works are extremely sophisticated and entertaining creative myths. The Pythons manage to strip lies, denial, and pretense from every subject they touch—they have no illusions: life is absurd, unpredictable, often cruel, and it always ends in death, but this is what gives creative energy to art and life itself.

Since the Pythons frequently formulate their morals in songs, it seems appropriate to end this analysis with one that adds yet another perspective to the place of death in life. Here are a few lines from a little number Eric Idle tossed off in the 1990s for the videogame Discworld II: Mortality Bytes, proving that the creative myth of Monty Python has really changed reality in more than one way and literally lives on in another dimension:

> There's a place you're always welcome,
> It's as nice as it can be,
> Everyone can get in,
> 'cause it's absolutely free,
> That's Death.
> No need to take a breath,
> Just lie around all day,
> With not a single bill to pay,
> Hooray.
> That's Death,
> No more sicknesses or flu,
> If you've lived beyond your means,

You can die beyond them, too,
Boo-hoo.
That's Death.
It's a tête à tête with fate,
If you're not feeling great,
Then it's the best way to lose weight,
Mate. (Idle)

Too good to be true? Oh well, that's death and there is nothing we can do about it.

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Chapter 2
The Body, Desire, and the Abject

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The Corpse and Cannibalism in Monty Python's Flying Circus Sketches

The body in Monty Python's productions operates as a site of transgression in several different discourses, including sexual, medical, political, and spiritual. In its iconography it bears a visible imprint of the aesthetics and preoccupations of the surrealist and Dadaist movements, with their inspiration from and fascination with psychoanalysis, as well as futuristic transformation of a human being under the influence of technology. In its wider cultural context, Monty Python's corporeal practices emerge from a general public discussion on censorship and the 1960s sexual liberation.

The "Pythonesque" body is often exposed in its nudity—fragmented, augmented, merged with the machine, deformed, reformed, cross-dressed, masqueraded, or destroyed. With various aims in mind, the body is carnivalesque and comic, grotesque and sacrilegious, transgressive and shocking. Out of this variety of uses and abuses of the body in Monty Python's Flying Circus, I intend to select the contexts in which the body is a site of play between desire and abjection, fascination and disgust, attraction and horror, and within this context my object of analysis will be the dead body, the corpse, the cadaver.

The theoretical framework for my analysis will embrace the concepts of the liminal and grotesque body (A. van Gennep, V. Turner, M. Bakhtin), the abject (J. Kristeva), and cannibalistic incorporation (L.V. Thomas). In all of these theories the body is defined as a borderline phenomenon, located between different states and forms of signification. Paradoxically, although evoking a number of interpretations and placed within identifiable discursive practices, the body retains at its core the ambiguity and ambivalence of liminality, suspension between the object and the subject, the other and the same, excess and

the norm, death and life, integrity and fragmentation. It is because of this transgressive character that the body enters into the field of abjection and the grotesque, the field in which the cadaver is also placed. Among many references to the dead body in Monty Python's sketches, I intend to examine the two final sketches of episode twenty-six, and the cartoon interlude, all three dedicated to the motif of cannibalism. In both the lifeboat and the undertaker's sketch, the idea of abjection is strongly linked to cultural taboos, to the interaction between the grotesque and the macabre, the initial enforcement of abjection, and its subsequent transformation and inscription into the carnivalesque grotesque, metaframework, or critical/satirical discourse.

THE ABJECT, THE GROTESQUE BODY, AND CANNIBALISM

Julia Kristeva locates the concept of abjection in transgression—in crossing the borders between categories guarded by cultural and social prohibitions and taboos. Abjection is caused by "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The inbetween, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). Here Kristeva's concept of the abject overlaps with the liminal, the threshold (Turner 24–27), the one disturbing orders and classifications leading to a crisis of identity, chaos, and suffering, but when placed within the ritual structure, becoming only a temporary suspension, crisis, disintegration, leading to another order and boundary.[1] In a ritual or carnival structure, the abject or what is described as potentially abjective is a condition of change and transformation and as such is inscribed in the optimistic and, in Bakhtin's terms, cosmic regeneration. However, Kristeva seems to suggest that the abject always escapes whatever framework it is placed in, whether of taboo or prohibition: "The abject is related to perversion. . . . The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but it turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them,

the better to deny them" (7).

Kristeva's idea of the body as the abject bears a strong resemblance to Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque body. The grotesque body, which in Bakhtin's conceptual system "is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (Bakhtin 26), when inscribed in the carnival structure, apart from disturbing and reversing orders and boundaries, possesses a "positive, assertive character" (Bakhtin 19). In representations of the grotesque body "the stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots" (Bakhtin 26). The same openings and orifices through which bodily liquids flow, for Kristeva, are dangers for the internal and external integrity of the body (Kristeva 56, 83). They transgress the borders between inside and outside, polluting the body and questioning the idea of the integral self. Outside the carnival or ritual regenerative structure the same elements of the grotesque body become the causes of abjection. In the noncarnival context, the grotesque images of the body, as Bakhtin suggested, "remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed" (Bakhtin 29). The abject seems to arise from the confrontation of the classic concept of the body that was isolated, independent, and separated from other bodies with the previous or simply alternative representation of the grotesque body without clearly defined borders and with apertures opening it to the outside world (Bakhtin 29).

In the theory of the abject the corpse is defined as "the utmost of abjection," (Kristeva 4) as "death infecting life," as "something rejected from which one does not part" when it is considered outside scientific and religious discourses (Kristeva 4). The corpse is seen as transgressing all possible borders: "If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening

not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva 3). The corpse as the borderline phenomenon poses a threat to the definition of one's identity and its boundaries.

The corpse in many cultures is represented as a fundamental element of pollution, subject to various taboos and rituals surrounding its treatment and disposal. In her study of biblical abomination Kristeva describes the corpse (including the animal corpse) as polluting because of its transgressive and transitional character, which escapes definition, and also because of its opposition to divine law and offense to what is considered acceptable:

> A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic—the corpse represents fundamental pollution. A body without soul, a non-body, disquieting matter . . . it must not be displayed but immediately buried so as not to pollute the divine earth. . . . The human corpse is a fount of impurity and must not be touched (Numbers 19:13ft). Burial is a means of purification. (Kristeva 109)

Because of its impurity, the corpse is subject to strictly defined procedures of disposal to avoid pollution and abjection, to not face its unspeakable horror. Containing the body, sealing it in a coffin, isolating it in the cemetery are procedures to erase death from our lives, of closing and concealing it to obliterate its senselessness (Thomas 208–9), shielding us from the confrontation with death as a process, as an inbetween stage, suspension, represented in the imagery of the transi (Ariès 118–19), the rotting cadaver. Death seen as a process—as death encroaching upon life and life encroaching upon death—becomes a repository of fears and obsessions concerning premature death and burial and life processes continuing after death (Ariès 387–95). Roland Barthes describes this encroachment as a source of taboo in his analysis of E. A. Poe's

“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”:

> It seems clear that what is taboo in death, what is essentially taboo, is the passage, the threshold, the dying; life and death are relatively well-classified states, and moreover they enter into a paradigmatic opposition . . . but the transition between the two states, or more exactly . . . their mutual encroachment, outplays meaning and engenders horror: there is the transgression of an antithesis, of a classification. (182)

Like other abjects, the dead body is inscribed in a number of dietary prohibitions and taboos against cannibalism. Cannibalism itself, whether present in its ritual physical or symbolic form, is further subject to strict procedures and behaviors. When seen as a cultural ritual process, cannibalism is coded as a way of preserving the corpse, of stopping the process of its disintegration, enabling the survival of the consumed within the body and mind of the consumer (Thomas 171). In archaic societies this was particularly related to cannibalistic incorporation in endocannibalism involving members of the family, group, community. Exocannibalism related to war practices, apart from its destructive aims, also symbolically meant the incorporation of the object’s desirable features (Thomas 163, 164). In cannibalism the body has to be properly prepared to allow for the breach of the dietary taboo, with exocannibalism involving more preparatory and culinary procedures, mixing the body with other foods as part of its cultural assimilation and culturalization (Thomas 167), taming the abject. This is related to the risk and ambivalence connected with cannibalistic incorporation—of repulsion and love, identification and rejection, self-destruction (because of incorporation of the same) and loss of identity (because of internalization of the other) (Thomas 165). In the case of symbolic substitutes of cannibalism[2] one can transgress the taboo without violating the law through the primarily linguistic processes of sublimation and displacement (Thomas 168).[3]

Along a different trajectory, the apex of abjection is located

Along a different trajectory, the apex of abjection is located in the mother's body and the scene of birth, which is the moment of suspension between outside and inside, life and death, the same and the other (Kristeva 155). The concept of the mother is suspended between the abject and the sublime, both significant in the formation of one's subjectivity. The mother's body confronts life with death, fascination with fear, repulsion with desire (Braidotti 119). The birth scene and the body as the location of both life and death that cause abjection are at the same time the features of Bakhtin's grotesque, which is preoccupied with the borderline phenomena of birth and death united in the cosmic regenerating principle and conveyed through the procedure of degradation: "To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. . . . Degradation builds a bodily grave for a new birth. . . . Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving" (Bakhtin 21).

We have gathered the concepts of the body, the corpse, cannibalism, and the maternal body as instances of the abject and we have seen how the same phenomena are embraced by a carnivalesque and ritualistic framework, in which what is potentially the cause of abjection is turned into positive, regenerative symbolism partly represented through the notion of the grotesque. It is in reference to this ambivalence that I intend to locate Monty Python's Flying Circus's sketches on death, the dead body, and cannibalism. My objective is to examine how the sketches maneuver between the grotesque and the abject, the carnival and the taboo, the comic and the offensive, always verging on the border of transgression and provocation.

THE "LIFEBOAT" SKETCH

Starting from the meta-level convention of several false beginnings disturbing its fictional framework, the lifeboat sketch presents five mariners in a small lifeboat drifting in the ocean, dirty and exhausted, on the thirty-third day after the catastrophe. With decreasing chances of rescue and fading

catastrophe. With decreasing chances of rescue and fading hopes for survival, the mariners enter the liminal area—located outside society, where normal rules are abandoned, survival principles take over, and priorities change. Their status in the incorporation stage that should normally follow the limen becomes insignificant because of the threat of incompletion of the process—death by starvation. This inbetweenness places the characters in suspension—outside the social rules in the realm where cannibalism becomes both a rational solution in survival strategies and a noble, humanitarian sacrifice for others. However, cannibalism as an idea justified by the survival principle still has to undergo a certain codification or ritualization if it is to transgress the dietary prohibition and abjection caused by such a use of the human body. The captain's sacrifice—as the one responsible for the crew—is inscribed in the religious ritual of offering the body for regeneration, which is suggested by the thirty-third day's reference to the year of Christ's sacrifice. The sacrificial discourse, which is mentioned by Kristeva and Thomas as a way of transgressing the abjection caused by eating a corpse, nevertheless is in conflict with another method of avoiding the horror and danger of the taboo, the culinary preparation inscribing the body into the domain of culture and symbolism. The body offered by the captain, the body partly consumed by death (a gammy leg), thus justifying homicide by eliminating the one least likely to survive, is from the culinary perspective polluted, not fresh, already disintegrating. In the culinary context, for successful symbolic incorporation the body consumed should be healthy and have positive power associations. It is this sudden change from the symbolic meaning of cannibalism to the strictly culinary idiom that causes the mixture of repulsion and the grotesque, which is further increased by the arbitrariness of choice that cannot be permitted within the cultural regulation of the taboo. The idea of taste or preference for somebody's meat ("I'd rather eat Johnson" [2.41]) mixes a number of domains that are kept separate—a preference for lean meat, Kosher food, or liking somebody. Healthy diet, religious dietary restriction, or simple

affection lead to a situation very much like a conversation over a menu in a restaurant, into which the scene eventually transforms. Interestingly, the lack of agreement as to the source of food is analogous to the ambivalence related to cannibalistic incorporation—of negotiating between the other and the same, of acceptance and rejection, desire and abjection. It is in this ambivalence that the ambiguity of desire and hunger is located —the eagerness with which the characters offer their own bodies and desire the others' certainly mixes the culinary and sexual domains, carrying at the same time implications of homosexuality.

In order to look at the live body as a source of food, the mariners repeat several times that they have no chance of survival, thus inscribing themselves in the domain of the nearly dead. Through this distancing they are able both to talk about the others' bodies in culinary terms, to fragment the body and question its integrity, as well as consider themselves within this discourse. The readiness with which they offer their own bodies to the rest bears an imprint of civilized codes (related to self-sacrifice) standing in opposition to the struggle for survival. The confrontation between good manners, hospitability, and the tabooed barbarism of cannibalism (abjection) generates the dissonance that is the source of humor. However, the moment the liminal situation is made familiar by the direct framework of a restaurant scene, the implication of cannibalism becomes abjective once again, causing disgust and shock, preparing the ground for the next scene presenting a letter protesting against insinuations of cannibalism in the Royal Navy.

THE CARTOON INTERLUDE

The cartoon following the lifeboat sketch presents a series of images of people eating either human figures or from human figures. The consumed human body is either food or a container, in which bodily or non-bodily liquids are kept. In this respect the cartoons are a subversive realization of the holy communion and transubstantiation, of eating and drinking the bodv and from the bodv. The navv motifs in the costumes worn

by either the consumer or the consumed ironically refer to earlier comic implications of cannibalism in the Royal Navy. The cartoons are obsessed with all kinds of orifices—we see the eaters' open mouths and the opening of the consumed body, a Victorian woman spooning fruit or a brain-like substance from an open human head, a young man and a girl drinking some liquid from a headless figure with a straw. Human figures and bodies are fragmented, multiplied, and placed in everyday culinary contexts replacing in paradigmatic relationships some well-known foods, like chips or a lollipop. Both the fragmentation of the body, making it a part of the digestive cycle, and the opening of the body are components of grotesque imagery which outside its original carnivalesque context is supposed to shock or tease the classical tastes of corporeal integrity. The culinary context in which the cartoon bodies are placed, a clear reference to common foods and dishes, in which a single element is replaced by a corporeal equivalent, seems almost to parody theories of cultural incorporation evident in cannibalism. Through paradigmatic replacement, cannibalism is turned into a cultural practice, common and commonplace, in aesthetic and sensual terms located very close to everyday experience. What seems to shock is the suggestiveness of this proximity by the combination of culinary aestheticism and the eagerness and appetite with which the cartoon figures consume bodily substances.

THE "UNDERTAKER'S SKETCH"

The "Undertaker's sketch" is introduced by a character demanding a change of subject, a sketch about clean decent human beings. The undertaker's permitted representation can hardly be different, because of the taboos related to abjection that they have to deal with. Any implication to the contrary opens up a whole range of abjective speculations, which the viewers familiar with Monty Python's poetics are bound to engage with. Almost each line of the sketch transgresses the

taboos imposed on the domain of death and the treatment of the dead body, releasing the corpse from cultural regulations and containment. This is partly performed through the replacement of euphemisms with direct expressions revealing what the language tries to keep concealed. The sketch confronts us with at least five causes of abjection—the corpse stripped of symbolic euphemistic description and containment of proper burial procedures, the disintegrating corpse (the transi), premature burial ("she looks quite young"), eating the corpse ("not raw, cooked"), and the mother's body (2.43). The use of expressions such as "we deal with stiffs," "burn" instead of "cremate" or "dump her in the Thames," or even the suggestive "crackle, crackle, crackle" (2.43), is the transgression of burial procedures and ways of addressing the dead, to avoid their disrespectful objectification. Bringing the corpse in a sack to the undertaker's, being a transgression of the principles of storing and transporting the dead body, at the same time places the body outside a proper container that could separate the dead from the living. As a result of its proximity, the body in a sack poses a threat as a source of taboo and pollution, at the same time evoking laughter because of the inadequacy of the container and the aesthetic dissonance with the neatness and respectability of the living characters' costumes and the interior design.

The description of burial and burning refers to the idea of the corpse as an inbetween phenomenon, partly dead yet sustaining various life processes—reminiscent of the macabre image of the rotting body—the transi. The implications of premature burial, another horror that obsessed people for many centuries,[4] also refer to the inbetweenness of the dead body, where the border between life and death is blurred, thus being a source of abjection. The descriptions of being "eaten up by weevils and nasty maggots" or being "stuffed in flames" (2.43), inappropriate and disgusting as they are, become shocking and abjective when the suggestion that she (the mother) might not be quite dead is added. The reference to the young age of the diseased further increases the possibility of such speculations.

The idea of cannibalism appears quite suddenly in the sketch after the undertaker's literal and evocative descriptions of burial procedures as "nasty" and his inspection of the body in the sack, when he loudly announces to the man in the back "I think we've got an eater." To the customer's question "Are you suggesting eating my mother?" the undertaker quickly responds "Yeah, not raw. Cooked" (2.43), which is supposed to decrease the horror and disgust. Surprisingly, the customer admits that he feels a little bit "peckish," but soon has doubts about the idea of eating his mother (after the undertaker asks "How about stuffing?"[5]), which the undertaker dispels by the following suggestion, which seems to meet with the customer's approval: "Look, tell you what—we'll eat her; if you feel a bit guilty about it afterwards, we can dig a grave and you can throw up in it" (2.44). When confronted with the nasty descriptions of burning and burying the body, cannibalism is paradoxically introduced as a more positive alternative. Like cannibalistic ritual incorporation, the body in this instance of culinary cannibalism is not subject to processes causing abjection such as the body's disintegration or decomposition. Because of the mother-son relationship it bears certain features of endocannibalism, which is supposed to preserve the dead person in the body of the consumer. However, with each statement that seems to rationalize cannibalism in the customer's eyes, some new border is transgressed, causing disgust and abjection. The horror of eating a raw corpse is supposed to be decreased by the imposition of the cultural assimilation processes related to the culinary sphere. However, the vision of the mother's body undergoing culinary preparations (being stuffed) is another transgression performed on a body that should be left in peace. The solution to the problem of the customer's remorse, which paradoxically leads us to the accepted form of burial in the ground and signifies the rejection of cannibalism, causes a critical level of abjection and the climax in the sketch, which is left unresolved because of the studio audience's staged intervention. The reference to vomiting, the reaction that Kristeva describes as "protecting" us from the improper and the

unclean, i.e., the abject (Kristeva 2), unleashes reactions of disgust and loathing that have been triggered by the sketch's transgressions. At the same time, the image of vomiting the mother's partly digested body is perceived as a further stage of mistreatment and abuse of the corpse, while insinuating the son's tabooed disgust at his mother after death.

The transgressions related to the corpse mentioned above are intensified because we deal here with the body of the mother. Playing with the maternal corpse in a sack breaches a number of cultural taboos related to the concept of the mother. The maternal corpse represents, if we follow Kristeva's arguments, two ultimate abjects brought together. Every abuse, offense, or mistreatment of the body in the sketch is doubly marked by a transgression against the taboo of death and the mother figure, which consists of two aspects—the abject and the sublime (Oliver 61). A mother carried in a sack reverses the image of the mother holding a child or carrying it in her womb. Consuming the mother's body is a displacement of feeding the son with milk, of the maternal body as a nurturing body, a source of nourishment and life. Vomiting in this context signifies the rejection of the mother, recognizing the maternal body's abjective status, in a travestied attempt to bring it back to its proper place in a grave. Although these meanings are not apparent, they seem to demonstrate how culturally charged the taboos are that Monty Python play with.

Like the preceding cartoon interlude, the imagery in the sketch is replete with orifices, openings, lack of containment or inadequate containers, fragmentation, instability, transition—all characteristic of the carnival grotesque. Here the studio audience's staged protest serves as a substitute of the phase of ritual incorporation—a series of transgressions revealing the horror and disgust of the abject and the taboo are placed safely within the framework of the audience's protest and criticism, the return to the status quo.

CONCLUSION

In From Fringe to Flying Circus, Roger Wilmut says the sketch about cannibalism “looks suspiciously like an attempt to see just what they can get away with” (213). He reports Cleese admitting that they “overdid the use of shock,” saying that “what you discover is that stuff with an element of shock does have the ability to make an audience laugh much more than stuff without it” (Wilmut 213). Playing with taboos and transgressions temporarily unleashes the abject, causing shock and disgust, only to place it within the regulations of carnivalesque reversals, metafictional frameworks, or political and social satire. However, as the abject is always perverse, its placement within any regulatory frameworks is never fully successful, always leaving the aftertaste of transgression.

Although the presentation of the body in Monty Python’s Flying Circus series seems to share many characteristics with the traits of the grotesque body, its contemporary, nonritual images are described by Bakhtin as “deprived of regenerating ambivalence” (21), and most often lacking the carnivalesque “positive, assertive character” (19). Being located within the noncarnivalesque or fragmented carnival context, with outside laws and regulation imposed on it, corporeal representations lose their cosmic connotations and seem to focus more on the moment of transgression and disturbance or on political or satirical messages. Laughter that derives from the carnival spirit and its transgressive potential (to quote Bakhtin once again) “frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities. For this reason great changes, even in the field of science, are always preceded by a certain carnival consciousness that prepares the way” (49). When seen in the context of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the works created by the Monty Python group (particularly its earlier productions) bear some trace of this carnival consciousness.

NOTES

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1. The ritual structure defined by Arnold van Gennep as three stages: separation, limen, incorporation (Turner 24).
2. Thomas classifies the rituals of Christian communion and transubstantiation as symbolic substitutes of cannibalism (Thomas 168).
3. In his study, Thomas describes a strong ritualization and ordering of cannibalism in an air crash in the 1970s in the procedures that made the breach of the taboo possible, a case not totally irrelevant to the discussion of Monty Python’s sketches.
4. Ariès analyzes documents and wills between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, testifying to a fear of, even panic

about, premature burial (Ariès 387–95).
5. This question does not appear in the DVD version or in the script book Just the Words, it is quoted in Wilmut (213).

Chapter 3
The Representation of the Woman's Body in Monty Python's The Meaning of Life

Katarzyna Poloczek

In "Openings on the Body," Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price claim that "[t]o say that the body is a discursive construction is not to deny a substantial corpus, but to insist that our apprehension of it, our understanding of it, is necessarily mediated by the contexts in which we speak" (7). Accordingly, the following chapter probes the various contexts in the representations of the woman's body employed in Monty Python's The Meaning of Life (1983). It is argued here that despite the seemingly surreal content, the aforementioned film aptly addresses vital gender issues, frequently exhibiting a poignant critique of patriarchal society, a critique coinciding with other seminal texts of the period (e.g., Kristeva's or Foucault's philosophical works translated into English at more or less that time, or Laura Mulvey's critique of mainstream cinema).

What is more, the multiple representations of the woman's body in The Meaning of Life introduce a key element of gender performativity: most of the women's roles are played by the Pythons themselves, few acted by biological women (e.g., the laboring woman from the "The Miracle of Birth. Part One," or Helen, the tutor's wife in "Growth and Learning"). Most of the time, if the woman's body is "social → biological" inscribed, then the performance is provided by the male actors. This chapter puts forward the thesis that in The Meaning of Life, the Pythons employ women to act out mostly the "biological → social" coding of gender categories, such as birthing, sexual intercourse, or corporeal eroticism ("Death"). Furthermore, in The Meaning of Life, the "natural" female body is almost entirely mute (in comparison to the constantly chattering male impersonations); the number of lines uttered by biological

actresses in the film could be literally counted. Additionally, the woman's "natural" body as depicted in The Meaning of Life is either completely motionless (vide the mother in "The Miracle of Birth. Part One," or Helen, the tutor's wife in "Growth and Learning") or its sensuous movement is designed for male sexual arousal (see the female breasts going up and down during the girls' chase in "Death" or in the final dance in the Paradise show). In other words, if the biological women seem to suffer from silencing, passivity, and sexual objectification, the "social" constructed men-impersonated women astonish us with their performative ignorance (to the point of mental retardation), and their persistent clinging to gender stereotypical roles, hyperbolically and subversively blown out of all proportion by the Pythons.

Considering all the above, the Pythons' impersonations of women (to some interpreted as misogynistic) could be conceived of as gender parodies of stereotypical roles, very much in line with what Judith Butler first described in her seminal book Gender Trouble as the performative gender drag aesthetics. Elaborating her earlier gender theory in the more recent The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection, Butler explains that: "[i]t is not enough to say that gender is performed, or that the meaning of gender can be derived from its performance, whether or not one wants to rethink performance as a compulsory social ritual" (144). She explicates "[t]he relation between drag performances and gender performativity" (145) as follows:

> When a man is performing drag as a woman, the "imitation" that drag is said to be is taken as an "imitation" of femininity, but the "femininity" he imitates is not understood as being itself an imitation. Yet if one considers that gender is acquired, that is assumed in relation to ideals which are never quite inhabited by anyone, then femininity is an ideal which everyone always and only "imitates." Thus, drag imitates the imitative structures of gender, revealing gender itself to be an imitation. (145)

Furthermore, Butler adds that “[d]rag allegorizes some set of melancholic incorporative fantasies that stabilize gender” (146). In The Meaning of Life, a performative aesthetics is overtly employed inbetween the proper sections by the Python-played TV speaker, announcing the “find the fish competition” intermission. The male drag queen, in S/M underwear and a pink wig, goes around the scene repeating the surreal lines about the “elusive, fishy fish.” Butler points out that:

> What drag does expose, however, is that in the “normal” constitution of gender presentation, the gender that is performed is constituted by a set of disavowed attachments, identifications which constitute a different domain of the “unperformable.” Indeed, what constitutes the sexually unperformable may—but not need not to—be performed as gender identification. (147, italics original)

Nonetheless, the multiple dimensions in representing the woman’s body, various gender identifications, “biological” and “sociocultural constructivism,” the performatively reiterated nature of gender and what Butler defines as “unperformable” elements—all disclose the aforementioned aspects as inseparable from one another. What needs stressing in The Meaning of Life is that the order of sequencing women/men acting out the female/feminine gender roles is designed very meticulously to reveal an intricate pattern, highlighting gender’s interdependence on the “biological,” “cultural,” and performative aspects. In “The Miracle of Birth. Part One,” birthing is at first shown as a travesty of the “natural” process, hence, so as not to create the additional point of the mockery, the laboring woman’s role is played by a real woman. If the Pythons had employed one of their own group to act out the scene, its mock-documentary “realism” would be destroyed, as the audience’s attention would be focused on the male performer, and not on the surrounding milieu. In “The Miracle of Birth. Part Two,” nonetheless, the Python-played Catholic Yorkshire mother, hardly noticing another fetus falling to the

floor from between her legs, obviously creates no illusion of circumstantial realism, despite the naturalistic mise en scène. The surreal sequences of the musical singing and dancing, interpolated in the main footage, anticipate the situational, absurd convention employed in the “Live Organ Transplants” sketch.

THE MATERNAL BODY (THE FETUS RECEPTACLE) AS THE HOSPITAL HOSTAGE

In The Meaning of Life’s maternity ward scene, entitled “The Miracle of Birth. Part One,” the experience of childbirth is depicted as a purely medical procedure, controlled entirely by male doctors, the role of a woman in labor is made virtually redundant. At the beginning of the scene, the bored and uninterested male doctors enter the delivery room; finding the place “barren,” they fill it with specialized medical apparatus, such as the mysterious machine “that goes ping.” One of them orders in “the most expensive equipment in case the administrator comes.” Nonetheless, a little later they realize that “still something is missing,” only to discover the lacking element is the laboring woman herself, defined here as “the patient.” In other words, the woman is overtly referred as “something” and not “someone.” When the woman’s body is thrust into the delivery room, the doctors instruct the nurses to “mind the machine,” being more concerned not to damage the apparatus than the human being. She is informed that her pregnancy is being monitored by the most expensive equipment, a 750,000-pound machine, the doctor remarking: “Aren’t you lucky?” The bizarre sound that the machine produces signifies that the “baby is still alive.” On the whole, the woman giving birth is objectified not only verbally but physically; nobody explains anything to her, let alone takes proper account of her condition. Helen Marshall points out that “[m]any women and perhaps most feminists will have experienced the pregnant body as involved in a struggle for control” (69).

The aforementioned scene illustrates perfectly the social

The aforementioned scene illustrates perfectly the social and medical processes, whose roots date back to much earlier times. The mocked medicalization of the woman's body recalls the historical context when delivery was an entirely woman-attended phenomenon; starting from the place of birth, home, not hospital, through the private rather than public dimension of the event, to the fact that in the past the laboring woman was assisted by a midwife performing the function of a trained obstetrician. The Latin-derived term obstetrician, as the Collins dictionary explains, signifies "a woman who stands opposite or in front of." In the course of time, when the obstetrician's profession became profitable and prestigious, it was incorporated into the male domain of professional science, hence women assisting during delivery were put out of business, stigmatized as untrained, dangerous relics of the bygone times. However, what was gone together with that tradition was the idea of the female helper in her auxiliary function to the laboring woman, whereas the central perspective was reserved to the woman giving birth.

As soon as delivery was incorporated into the male professional area, the woman's function was marginalized. Instead of active participation in delivery, the woman has to lie motionlessly and allow male doctors to do their work. The immobilized woman's needs are completely ignored; if she dares to protest, she is hushed and viewed as someone who interrupts the professional male team with her silly questions. Hence, in The Meaning of Life it is the male doctors, surrounded with their high-priced equipment (whose function they barely comprehend), who constitute the center of the film scene. One of the doctors addresses the expectant woman in a patronizing way, treating her as if she were both mentally disabled and infantile. To the woman's logical question: "What do I do?" the arrogant reply comes: "Nothing, dear. You are not qualified. Leave it to us." This clearly corresponds to such claims as the one made by Anne Balsamo, who observes that the "laboring body is the maternal body which is increasingly treated as a technological body— both in its science fictional and science factual form as 'container' for the fetus, and in its role as the

object of technological manipulation in the service of human reproduction" (282).

Hence the previously biological process of childbirth is contemporarily conceived of as a purely medical procedure. Defining woman as a patient implies her state as pathological, demanding professional assistance. Since pregnancy is viewed as an illness, the woman in the "The Miracle of Birth" sequence is assured by male doctors: "Don't you worry, we'll soon have you cured." Accordingly, it is not the delivering woman around whom the narrative operates but the hospital itself. Very much in the same vein, Foucault employs an apt phase, the "curing machine," to refer to hospital (103). If one examines the scene in detail, one might discern how the empowering gaze of the camera construes the hospital's all-surrounding sense of authority. Considering all the above, from the doctors' dismissive behavior one might deduce that the hospitals' (female) clients/patients are tolerated as long as they remain the necessary cog maintaining the health system's continuation.[1] A perfect example of such "authoritarian medical interventions and controls" (Foucault 103) is the procedures applied nowadays to the child during and before birth. Lynda Birke claims that "[e]ven fetuses enter culture, through the use of techniques of prenatal visualization and screening" (46). Following this line of thinking, as mocked by the Pythons, the newborn baby first needs to be frightened: thus, the whole delivery room is referred to as "a fetus frightening room" (the umbilical cord cut with the butcher's knife, "rough towels" and the newborn's "isolation").

Accordingly, Foucault perceives how the hospital's potency is increasingly extended, promoting itself as an unrivalled curing place outside which nobody has any chance of recovery (104), and the only lawful site for specialized medical assistance.[2] He also claims that "[f]inally, the hospital must serve as the supporting structure for the permanent staffing of the population by medical personnel. Both for economic and medical reasons, it must be possible to make the passage from treatment at home to a hospital regime" (104). The hospital's

real purpose is self-legitimization, justifying its own existence and maintaining continuous staff employment. In the Python clip, the life-saving fetus-monitoring machinery is switched on to demonstrate the pricey purchase to the hospital's accountants, not to secure the newborn's health. The 750,000-pound apparatus needs to prove to the administrative clerk its curative usefulness. The pompous administrator who enters the delivery room is impressed by the technological advancement of the medical services. He boasts about the favorable lease conditions of the overpriced equipment, and is delighted to see it so usefully employed. The doctor's explanation that the birth is "when you take a new baby out of the lady's tummy" seems a signifier of the progress of medicine. Paradoxical as it might be, the accountant can enter the antiseptic room in his own clothes, whereas the woman's husband is denied entry, and is sent off with a surreal reprimand: "only people involved allowed." What is more, as highlighted in the above-quoted Foucault's essays,[3] "The Birth of Social Medicine" and "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century," the medicalization of the woman's body has evoked many controversies and, in consequence, has led to a resistance movement advocating "demedicalization of childbirth" (Sawicki 199).[4]

To some extent, one might treat "The Miracle of Birth" scene as a strident voice against medicalized childbirth. The depicted woman is first objectified and ignored, then sedated, and sent home with the "happy pills" to counteract her "totally irrational feeling of depression." Although "the show is over," she might watch it at home, if she wants to know what was being done to her or the baby. Instead of relying on women-subjectifying medical establishments, Sawicki recommends that we "build health care institutions that enable women and those whom they love to structure childbearing around their own needs," since, as she concedes, "infertility, pregnancy, and childbirth are partly medical issues" (199). In this light, one might be astonished that the scene raises so many vital feminist issues and that it presents a perspective empathetic towards

women.

Much has been said about the textual dexterity of the Pythons' work and their usage of language. In the aforementioned scene, however, it is not words but the vivid imagery that affect us most. The laboring female body is transported on a wheeled hospital bed, headlong like an object. With her head, the confined woman literally bangs open the doors of the hospital corridor. The camera gazes upon her from above, God's perspective. The bright lamp hurts her eyes. Her ears are bombarded with a metallic pounding noise that echoes in the clinical milieu. Her face looks agitated. A widened perspective shows the sterile and impersonal hospital corridors: all white and deserted. We cannot see the woman's facial expression when the masked nurse bends over her. And during the delivery her face remains undisclosed, her passive body viewed from a legs-up angle. The account of the delivery room is never through her eyes, her perspective not mattering in this scene at all. The camera highlights male fascination with expensive gimmicks and reveals the men's scopic urge to look inside the woman's body. In Braidotti's words:

> According to psychoanalytical interpretation, the scopic drive is linked to both knowledge and control and domination. In other words, it is the practice of opening something up to see how it functions; the impulse to go and see, to "look in" is the most fundamental and child-like form of control over the other's body. In this sense, the curiosity that pushes the child to break his/her toy to see how it is made inside can be seen as the most primitive form of sadism. Applied to the scientific practice, this analysis is quite devastating: it makes clinical anatomy into an adult version of infantile sadism. It is the expression of curiosity linked to the most archaic sadistic impulses. It can be argued that the mother's body is the privileged target of violence, in that it represents the origin of life and one's own origins. Evelyn Fox Keller stresses the violent and sadistic implications of what we would call the contemporary bio-medical perversion. (24)

contemporary bio-medical perversion. (24)

All things considered, this scene in The Meaning of Life reveals many key elements of modern feminist discourse. It lays bare the mechanisms by which the woman's body in the 1980s was constructed as passive, vulnerable, and more susceptible to manipulation. One of the most allegedly surreal lines of the examined scene is the comment in line with modern gender discourse uttered by the male doctor once the child is born. Asked whether it is a boy or girl, the doctor replies: "I think it's a little early to start imposing roles upon it."

THE WIFE'S BODY AS THE SITE OF THE HUSBAND'S IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

The complementary section of The Meaning of Life, "The Miracle of Birth. Part Two: The Third World," ridicules demedicalized birthing. More remote in the temporal setting (compare the actors' early twentieth-century costumes), it focuses on "natural" "home deliveries," hyperbolically mocked in the Catholic wife's performance. A laboring woman gives birth in the middle of her daily household routine. Doing the laundry, she barely notices as another infant slides out of her vagina and drops on the floor with a splash. Without missing a beat, she asks her daughter Deidre to collect "it" from the floor.

Located in a working-class area in Yorkshire, the second part of "The Miracle of Birth" portrays two sociocultural kinship models, dissimilar in their religious and ideological outlooks. A huge Catholic family follows what is referred to as the "Third World" model: umpteen children, an acquiescent, shabby, worn-out, near-obtuse mother and an irresponsible male sole bread-winner. Refusing to use contraceptives in line with the "every sperm is sacred" doctrine, the reckless Catholic husband ("do not blame me, blame the Roman Catholic Church doctrine") produces countless offspring for whom he cannot provide. Once made redundant, he sells some of his children for medical experiments. Treating his progeny as a dispensable commodity and his own private property, he can always cash in his livestock capital when in arrears. Although the exhausted

livestock capital when in arrears. Although the exhausted mother does not neglect her numerous offspring (overseeing their bedtime routines and addressing all of them by their first names), this dull-witted woman does not fully comprehend what is going on in the family, and thus seems unable to stand up for the children's well-being. Consequently, she allows her husband to take total control of family planning, or rather, the lack of it.

With just two children, an affluent Protestant family represents a higher social and class affiliation. The husband seems proud to entertain the mere possibility of erotic autonomy that his religious system permits, while his wife would like to explore and share this freedom with him in practice. The camera closes in on the dreamy eyes of the Python imagining a sex life that entailed intercourse more than just twice a lifetime. Employing the second conditional hypothetical mood ("if he only wanted to have sexual intercourse") indicates clearly that the Protestant head of the family has no intention of ever realizing his sexual fantasies with the woman he is married to. The sexually frustrated couple seems to be an ironic emblem of a Protestant "sex for pleasure" ethos.

One should be alert to a subtle yet striking parallelism here. Two seemingly dissimilar family models both operate around their central male figures, subscribing to clashing ideological and religious discourses, and in both of them, the wives seem to be equally marginalized in their psychological wishes or sensuous longings. Neither husband takes any notice of the vital needs of the woman he is married to. The wives' need for emotional or physical closeness, let alone sexual satisfaction, are not taken into account by either man. Although the Protestant husband seems able to provide a better financial security for his family, in terms of care and respect for his spouse he does not differ much from his Catholic counterpart. Both male family providers appear to take pride in their ideological outlooks, finding them superior to that of their neighbor. The strict following of their religious doctrines seems to be the sufficient justification for their self-centered actions and egoistic choices, the consequences of which are to be endured by other family members. Neither of them consults his

wife on family or sexual matters or is willing to bear the consequences of their decisions. For both husbands, ideology becomes a convenient excuse for indulging in their own desires: either in excessive libido (Catholic) or sexual frigidity (Protestant). As a result, the Catholic wife seems completely debilitated through constant labors, and her Protestant neighbor has come close to sexual neurosis.

The second part of “The Miracle of Birth” operates on the assumption that the married woman’s body is her husband’s sovereign territory, and that the man’s ideology dictates decisions about sexual life or family planning. In both models, the wives’ lack of influence on procreation or erotic pleasure is astonishing. This section in The Meaning of Life draws on the new model of family inseparably tied up with the modern politics of fecundity. Foucault has argued that at the turn of the twentieth century this sphere of life, along with other formerly private issues, “housing and habits,” “food and drink, sexuality and fecundity, clothing and the layout of living space,” started to fall within the jurisdiction of the “politico-medical” regime (100). However, it is in the realm of the family that this inference has become most conspicuous. Foucault advocates that:

> The problem of “children” (that is, of their number at birth and the relation of births to mortalities) is now joined by the problem of “childhood” (that is, of survival to adulthood, the physical and economic conditions for this survival, the necessary and sufficient amount of investment for the period of child development to become useful—in brief, the organization of this “phase” perceived as being both specific and finalized). It is no longer a matter of producing an optimum number of children, but one of the correct management of this age of life. (96)

On the whole, one might look at the section “The Miracle of Birth. Part Two” as the pathologization of poverty. But the question remains as to whether this destitution should be viewed as a cause or effect. The Catholic family might be

discerned as pathological not because there are too many children in it, or because its members are orthodox and dogmatic believers, but because neither of the parents can provide for the wealth and safety of the entire family. In consequence, the most vulnerable ones are those who have to bear the consequences of the grown-ups' decisions. This section is a bitter critique of inconsiderate masculinity in terms of family planning, and not just an attack on ideology or religion. Moreover, it becomes clear that the image of the family has changed. "The family is no longer to be just a system of relations inscribed in a social status, a kinship system, a mechanism for the transmission of property; it is to become a dense, saturated, permanent, continuous physical environment that envelops, maintains, and develops the child's body. Hence it assumes a material figure defined within a narrow compass" (Foucault 96).

FEMALE CORPOREALITY ON DISPLAY: THE WOMAN'S BODILY PASSIVE SUBSIDIARINESS

In the second part of the "Growth and Learning" sequence, an all boys' public-school teacher and his wife perform intercourse during the sexual education classes. Preceded by a tedious and technical-like enumeration of sexual-medical terms (such as "clitoris," "lubricating the vagina," "mounting"), the depicted scene transforms an intimate erotic act into a performative discourse of sexuality. Bored male pupils pay little, or no, attention, to the pitiful spectacle in front of their eyes. The performers are equally uninterested. In this deplorable interpretation, sex becomes one more duty to be fulfilled by the married couple. While making small talk, the teacher and his wife Helen (played by a biological woman) both undress mechanically, and, omitting the foreplay, proceed to penetration straight away.

What is more, the gender roles assigned to this pathetic performance are clearly and rigidly divided: a man acts and the woman's body receives his actions. All the active verbs employed by the teacher sanctify a stereotypical division into

employed by the teacher sanctify a stereotypical division into passive and active roles. As Emily Martin maintains, the linguistic bias against the woman's body goes deeper than commonplace myths. Analyzing the scholarly idiom, Martin asks rhetorically:

> A look at language—in this case, scientific language—provides the first clue. Take the egg and the sperm. It is remarkable how "femininely" the egg behaves and how "masculinely" the sperm. The egg is seen as large and passive. It does not move or journey, but passively "is transported," "is swept," or even "drifts" along the fallopian tube. In utter contrast, sperm are small, "streamlined," and invariably active. They "deliver" their genes to the egg, "activate the developmental program of the egg," and have a "velocity" that is often remarked upon. Their tails are "strong" and efficiently powered. Together with the forces of ejaculation, they can "propel the semen into the deepest recesses of the vagina." For this, they need "energy," "fuel" so that with a "whiplashlike motion and strong lurches" they can "burrow through the egg coat" and "penetrate" it. (181–82)

In the "Growth and Learning" scene, even if the woman's body is sexually stimulated by a male partner, it happens in order to allow for successful male penetration. The woman's sexual pleasure is secondary, a side-effect of the man's orgasm. After taking her clothes off, Helen lies motionlessly, bearing the weight of her husband's moving body. During the sexual act, she does nothing to enhance her own sexual satisfaction. The auxiliary female body appears to endure the husband's penetration with nearly no effect or reaction. If one assumes that the demonstration's purpose is to discourage teenagers from taking up any sexual activity, its goal seems fully achieved. The fact that the demonstration takes place in front of a male-only audience might also be indicative of the achieved effect. Lynne Segal notes that:

> The standard biological narrative of active penile

> The standard biological narrative of active penile penetration prompting and passive vaginal receptivity as the paradigm for human sexual encounter thus serves above to hide, as well as to create and sustain, the severe anxieties attaching to the penis, while also revealing men's fear of recognizing the existence of women's sexual agency —verbal, behavioural, or psychological. (107)

The performative dichotomy of passive (men) versus active (women) gender roles seems to be elaborated in "Live Organ Transplants," where a married couple end up being slaughtered by paramedics collecting organs for transplantation. The husband's autonomous and benevolent decision to fill in the donor card is motivated by the need to help others after his death, whereas his wife's irrational consent to be killed defies the commonsensical logic.[5] When assaulted by paramedics, the defiant husband fights for his life till the end; his desperate but relentless cries make a sharp contrast with his spouse's docile passivity. Unlike her active husband, the acquiescent wife is talked into being butchered, accepting uncritically the killers' cliché argument that her life is meaningless and, therefore, to make it worthwhile, she needs to sacrifice it. She can be so easily tricked into that reasoning because in a patriarchal society the woman during all her life is socialized into passive subsidiariness and taught to always put others' needs above her own. Therefore, what might look like a housewife's voluntary choice is, in fact, the compliant realization of the woman's normatively prescribed and socially conditioned role: that of a carcass to be processed for others' benefit. In agreement with the patriarchal standards, as in Margaret Atwood's Edible Woman, the woman is expected to passively sacrifice her body to be consumed and utilized in parts.

THE AGING FEMALE BODY AS MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY WRECKED

So far in this Python film, the worst crimes of the women are passivity and ignorance (e.g., that middle-aged couple having a

conversation on philosophers' names with "s" in the middle, or the female characters delighted to have death dine with them). In section B of the sixth part, "The Autumn Years," entitled "The Meaning of Life," the Pythons present the anti-Semitic cleaner Maria, who has searched for the meaning of life in the Prado Gallery, the British Museum, and the Library of Congress, but found none. Nearly losing her eyesight during her studies, Maria has nothing more to add than the commonplace banality "life is a game." Her last job is cleaning up in a French restaurant after the excessively obese Mr. Creosote's stomach literally explodes after dinner. Covered with his vomit, she comments "but at least I don't work for the Jews." The restaurant owner apologizes to the audience and puts a bucket, filled with Creosote's puke, over her head.

The anti-Semite cleaner is mostly portrayed on her knees, or covered in vomit. Maria is long in the tooth, dressed shabbily, and unattractive. Her intellectual and mental horizons are limited, and name-dropping of the places where she has done her research (cleaning and reading?) indicates that a highbrow milieu is of little use to someone who does not know how to benefit from it. Personal enlightenment is not a matter of the outer, but the inner environment. Maria's mental degeneration is complemented by the physical decay of her body, not only decrepit, but like Kristeva's abject, mired in the proverbial dung, spewed over with other people's ejections. Graybeal explains Kristeva's notion of abjection as "displacement of self, in which the self expels or spits itself out" (26). She elaborates this thought, claiming that "the abject is what is radically excluded, not what is simply or casually left behind in the process of object choice, but that which is violently and negatively chosen. The abject is what I most clearly want not to be" (26). The abject-Maria constitutes the embodiment of the most abominable human features: a sense of superiority over other denominations, racial prejudice, and religious hatred. The scene scorns the idea of wisdom coming with age. Maria, a mentally crippled racist, like the voluntary liver donor, is "past her prime," a postmenopausal woman, from the reproductive angle a dispensable creature, which additionally contributes to her

liminal status.

Postmenopausal aged female bodies are also depicted in the first scene of The Meaning of Life, in the sequence “Crimson Permanent Insurance,” which presents a revolution of senior employers against a young “oppressive corporate management.” Anne Fausto-Sterling notes that:

> Ours is a culture that fears the elderly. . . . Television ads portray only the arthritic, the toothless, the wrinkled, and the constipated. If estrogen really is the hormone of the youth and its decline suggests the coming of old age, then its loss is a part of biology that our culture ill equips us to handle. (170–71)

Male senior employees address one another with “come on boys,” “carry on lads,” and to the only woman in the team they command, “put the kettle on.” It appears that even within the least appreciated age category, the gender factor might weaken or strengthen one’s social position. It is a generally accepted fact in modern culture that aging affects women more than it does men, as if the passage of time was determined by gender categories.

THE YOUNG SEXUALIZED FEMALE BODY AS AN EMBODIMENT OF THE DEADLY FETISH

In “Bodies, Identities, Feminisms,” Denise Riley points out that “the sexed body is not something reliably constant, which can afford a good underpinning for the complications of the thousands of discourses on ‘women.’ How and when even the body will be understood and lived as gendered, or indeed as a body at all, is not fully predictable. Again this isn’t only a function of an individual phenomenology but of a historical and political phenomenology” (224). In the opening moments of the last section of The Meaning of Life, entitled “Death,” Arthur Jarret, committed for “crimes of sexist jokes in movies” is chased by a crowd of young, attractive bare-breasted women,

culminating in his death by jumping from a cliff. In their mad pursuit of Jarret, the sexualized female bodies are shown in detail: the breasts jerk up and down, the bodies are presented as if to titillate. In her seminal “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey[6] claims that:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual objects is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle. . . . The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. (qtd. in Gamman and Maniken 178)

Narratively, the women’s chase scene appears to be the objectification of the woman’s body in sheer sexist form. It does not advance the action, its sole purpose being to present the “moments of erotic contemplation.” Or to mock such a moment. The mad pursuit of an escaping man by a sexually insatiable, nearly naked female crowd was a regular part of the infamous Benny Hill Show. There, its aims seemed different, and it featured in almost every episode, together with patting of an old man’s bald head. In The Meaning of Life, slow motion seems to put the whole spectacle in inverted commas. What makes the performance even more surreal are the crash helmets worn by the pursuing women. Instead of sexual arousal, one watches these women with growing amazement. Anticipating accusations of misogynism, the Pythons might as well mock them with the erotic fantasy of Jarret’s selected punishment and his crime.

Paradoxical as it might be, no previous section of The Meaning of Life contains so many overt eroticized images or innuendoes. One could argue that it is a combination of Eros and Thanatos that leads to the eruption of sexy female bodies. The final part of The Meaning of Life seems to embrace all the previously implied men's erotic fantasies about fetishized female bodies: beginning with the spectacular masochistic demise, exerted by half-naked, retaliatory women, ending with the afterlife Paradise show "Everyday is Christmas," starring breast-exposing female angel-devil dancers. As an earlier-referred abject, the sexualized female bodily fetish is both desired and loathed. The aforementioned textual dichotomy is rendered cinematographically by the camera eye unabashedly zooming on female eroticized bodies, accompanied by the politically correct off-screen commentary that impugns the objectifying visual imagery. The ambiguously double-coded dialectic seems to stem from the post-Freudian legacy that accounted for men's demeaning the object of their sexual fantasies (vide Mulvey's argument), leading to the heroine's punitive onscreen death or at least retributive vengeance. In the Pythons' film, although it is not the chasing women but Arthur Jarret who dies in the final scene, the protagonist's death is depicted as an alluring, extended erotic fantasy that the male audience might still pleasurably indulge in.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, The Meaning of Life contains multifarious imagery of women and their corporeality. In line with the patriarchal discourse of the late 1980s, female bodies depicted in the film seem to embody Otherness on many social and cultural levels (vide women's conditioned passivity and their performatively mocked by the Pythons' benightedness). Apart from the common gender denominator, the women's bodies in the Pythons' film are diversified by numerous variables (class, social affiliations, denominations, ideological standpoints, age, etc.). Taking all into account, "[t]he body, hence, has become

the site of intense inquiry, not in the hope of recovering an authentic female body unburdened of patriarchal assumptions, but in the full acknowledgement of the multiple . . . possibilities of differential embodiment" (Price and Shildrick 12). The Meaning of Life does not aspire to provide the ultimate truth about women's "authentic" characters and their corporeality, but it does challenge the cultural representations of femininity generated, and then, maintained by the men-centered society, constituting a critically evocative voice about how women (and their bodies) were perceived in patriarchal culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

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1. Foucault advocates that “[t]he sudden importance assumed by medicine in the eighteenth century originates at the point of intersection of a new, ‘analytical’ economy of assistance with the emergence of a general ‘police’ of health” (95). He concludes that “[t]his program of hygiene as a regime of health for populations entails a certain number of authoritarian medical interventions and controls” (99). Consequently, Foucault enumerates other than health restoring functions of the modern medicine: “the reduction of death rate, and the extension of the average lifespan and life expectancy for every age group” (99).
2. Foucault argues that: “[m]edicine, as a general technique of health even more than as a service to the sick or an art of cures, assumes an increasingly important place in the administrative system” (100). When writing about health reforms, Foucault claims that “the hospital comes to have a specialized role of relative to the family (now considered as the primary instance of health), to the extensive and continuous network of medical personnel, and to the administrative control of population” (103).
3. For feminist analyses and criticism of Foucault, see for instance the 2004 collection of essays: Feminism and the Late Foucault.
4. Sawicki provides a full length account of this approach:

> [m]edicalized childbirth has come under attack from many camps since the birth of modern medicine. Individual men and women as well as organized groups representing scientific, economic, and feminist interests have considerably challenged the Western model of childbirth. . . . Natural childbirth was reintroduced as an option and a home-birth movement emerged. . . . there were proposals to admit fathers into delivery rooms, to eradicate the routine use of the lithotomy position, and to stop separating mothers and babies at birth. Both feminists and non-feminist critics have challenged the routine use of episiotomy, and drugs for pain and the induction of labor. Furthermore, individual women attempt to control the terms

> Furthermore, individual women attempt to control the terms of their own hospital childbirths by staying home longer before going into the hospital and thereby avoiding unnecessary C-sections due to prolonged labor, by demanding to have an advocate present during the birthing process, by finding physicians who support their desire to minimize medical intervention, and so forth. Such resistance has served as the basis of forms of client resistance and has worked to counter tendencies toward depoliticizing motherhood and childbirth. (192)

5. Unlike the constantly whining wife, critical of her husband's charitable acts ("all for the good of the country"), the well-motivated, easy-going and peace-loving husband evokes the audience's sympathy. The viewers might identity with the public-spirited dreadlocked hippie whose sole crime is the assumption that the signed donor card applied to the dead not to the living.
6. For the the contemporary feminist critique of Mulvay's theory, see Gamman and Maniken, p.176–82.

Part II
Monty Python, the Fool

Chapter 4
Monty Python and the Flying Feast of Fools

Stephen Butler and Wojciech Klepuszewski

Throughout the Middle Ages, and surviving in scattered remnants in the Renaissance, a rather unusual religious ceremony took place over the Christmas and New Year period, referred to as the Feast of Fools. It consisted of a “multifaceted mockery of the liturgy of the Mass” (Janik and Nelson 98), in which the roles of all its main participants were reversed, and its rituals inverted. The sacred hymns would be replaced with scurrilous and obscene songs, and the prayer and response ritual between priest and congregation was replaced by the priest braying like an ass three times, and the congregation responding likewise (Welsford 202). The men would dress as women, or wear their clothes inside out, and the women would either dress as men, or simply flaunt their nakedness. The consecrated area of the altar would be defiled by the attendance not of a priest, but an actual donkey, and the head of the clergy, the bishop, would be replaced by a Bishop of Fools, usually a child elected by the congregation. Quite often, the clergy themselves would sanction this behavior, and themselves participate. So, the subdeacons would promote themselves ahead of their superiors, and align themselves with their newly appointed bishop in a reversal of normal church hierarchy. In the meantime, the senior clergy would be forced to do menial jobs they were ill-equipped to perform. However, the leniency of the church toward this disruptive festival soon waned, and it died out, lingeringly, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It dispersed only as a specifically religious subversive custom, as it was transferred to the social and political spheres to deal with more secular, bourgeois matters (Janik and Nelson 101). And as a social custom, it was the carnival and the circus that provided the cultural space for a reversal of the hierarchies. Marcel Gutwirth makes the logical leap and argues that Monty

Python's Flying Circus is a descendant of this subversive religious rite. For him, the Flying Circus is a perfect example of a modern-day Feast of Fools, as it "preserves on the largest scale the privilege of nonsense in the pursuit of sense, the beneficial eruption of disorder in the creation and maintenance of a living order" (Gutwirth 57).

The Feast of Fools' primary characteristic was its use of role reversal and what Gutwirth refers to as a "radical inversion akin to that of laughter" (130). It was the "established hierarchies" of the church that were inverted in the Feast of Fools; hence its radical, subversive nature. The comedy of the Pythons operates according to the same principle of inversion, as Barry Took was the first to observe: "Much of Python comedy is simple reversal. Take Hell's Grannies. That's straight out of the Child's Book of How to Write Comedy. Thugs beating up old ladies? Why not have old ladies ganging up, roaming the streets looking for thugs to bash, young people to bully? But it's the way they do it that's so good" (qtd. in Perry 110). Python comedic reversal is of a similarly radical nature as that which occurs in the Feast of Fools. For instance, the figure of the Bishop of Fools, and the reversal of roles of religious figures is reincarnated in the Pythons through the sketch entitled "The Bishop" (episode 17), referring to the hero of an Avengers-like television show, whose special effects are provided by the moderator of the Church of Scotland and is directed by Prebendary "Chopper" Harris. Calling a senior church member "Chopper" is irreverence at its best, and the comedy of the sketch derives from watching the inept bishop fail to save his colleagues from various espionage-related deaths. The opening sequence sums up the sketch, as the audience hears the typical music of a British spy show, followed by the visual of a gun-sight, à la James Bond, only to have it focus on a bishop's miter. The final scene adds a further element of radical subversion, the hero threatening an insurance salesman by slamming his crosier down on his table, and the salesman exclaiming: "The Bishop!" The irony of this skit is that the Pythons themselves would face an equally threatening bishop, the bishop of Southwark, ten years later in a

television debate on the blasphemy of The Life of Brian.

During the Feast of Fools, the pomposity of the actual bishop was countered by the congregation, who would usually seat him on the ass in front of the altar. The essential humor of such an act derives from the juxtaposition of two fundamentally opposite characteristics, which Simonette Cochis describes as “an essential duality: spirit and matter, divine essence and animal nature” (Janik and Nelson 99). This duality is central to many religions, and in particular to Christianity, and the tactics used to subvert this duality in the Feast of Fools are identical to those employed by the Pythons. John Cleese made an interesting comment about the controversy surrounding The Life of Brian. He suggests that it was not the supposedly blasphemous content of the film that disconcerted the American Christian audience. More discomfiting to such an audience would have been the convention in British humor for the male actors to dress as, and act the roles of, women. Cross-dressing was a staple of the Flying Circus, as the team played all the roles, with Carol Cleveland being the notable exception. As mentioned, cross-dressing was also a common feature of the Feast of Fools. Both the medieval audience and the Pythons were aware of how sex made the Church “deeply uncomfortable,” Cleese himself characterizing the conventionally pious as “operating at a very low level of mental health” (qtd. in Yapp). This also explains the nudity of many of the female congregants during the Feast of Fools and medieval carnivals. Again, the Pythons employ the same device in the Flying Circus. In fact, “full frontal nudity” is a topic of debate, and the title of one episode (episode 8) with a naked Graham Chapman and his partner “Barbara,” played by Terry Jones, ironically declaring “never,” whilst a very conservatively dressed Michael Palin, and a uniformed policeman both opine: “Yes I’d do it, if it was valid. Or if the money was valid, and if it were a small part” (1.99). One of the most famous instances of nudity in the history of art is Michelangelo’s statue of David, who appears in a Gilliam animation decently clothed with a fig leaf, which a hand keeps trying to pull off. The sexual

repressiveness of modern society, not just the church, is a common theme in the Pythons' work. As Stephen Wagg notes, in both the Pythons and in their media pronouncements there is "an oblique demand for sexual and personal liberation by emotionally stunted, if highly educated, young middle-class males, symbolically wrenching their own umbilical cords and exhorting others to do the same" (qtd. in Strinati and Wagg 271). Whether the Pythons are themselves emotionally stunted is open to debate, but they certainly play emotionally stunted individuals very well. In the "Nudge nudge" sketch (episode 3), Eric Idle plays a bachelor talking to a husband, and the stream of sexual innuendos, some rather incomprehensible ("Follow me. I like that. That's good. A nod's as good as a wink to a blind bat, eh?" [1.40]), leads to an unsatisfactory climax: "'I mean like, you know . . . you've . . . er . . . you've slept . . . with a lady.' 'Yes.' 'What's it like?'" (1.41).

By indulging in nudity and sexual innuendo, both the Pythons and the participants in the Feast of Fools laid themselves open to the charge of vulgarity. A comic form often similarly charged is farce. Examining the etymological definition of the word farce, it is possible to see its connection with the Feast of Fools: "The word was originally applied to phrases interpolated in the litany between the words kyrie and eleison; to similar expansions of other liturgical formulae; to passages in the vernacular inserted between the Latin sentences in chanting the epistle" (Ehrlich 161). It was a name for the form of liturgical subversion that would make its way into the Feast of Fools. The historical origins of the word are today mostly forgotten, and farce as a comic form has diminished in status, according to Robert Williams: "Slapstick—farcical effect in general—is considered low" (58). The duality of spirit and matter discussed earlier is responsible for this lowering of the status of both slapstick and farce; they are comic forms that rely much more on matter than on spirit, or to put it in other terms, it is bodily humor rather than intellectual. Williams reaffirms farcical humor's importance, seeing it as a

> designation for those works that take play as their primary condition of being. . . . The farceur takes the play element latent in all comedy and intensifies it, revels in its energy and wackiness. So far from being a meagre, impoverished activity, farce—perceptual play largely for its own sake, unconcerned about meaning—may well be the ultimate mode of expression to which arts of the risible tend. (94)

A key characteristic of Python humor, the "play element" of farce, is their ability to subvert and radically undermine the conventions of the comic media in which they are working. As Williams says of both farce and the Pythons, they often risk the loss of their "own fictional underpinnings." In the Flying Circus, every single convention of the television format is subverted. Titles for the shows would be provided at the beginning of the episode, leading the audience to expect a theme-based comic approach that never materializes, and is often subverted in the title itself, which can offer several incomprehensible titles in a row, with no discernible connection between them, such as: "Episode Arthur. Part Seven. Teeth" (episode 4, 1.42). This episode begins promisingly with Eric Idle parodying the 1916 musical setting of Blake's "Jerusalem" by singing "And did those teeth in ancient time," but it will be halfway through the episode before there is another mention of dentures, and it comes from an exasperated military figure, complaining "I'm going to stop this sketch now, and if there's any more of this, I'm going to stop the whole programme. I thought it was supposed to be about teeth anyway. Why don't you do something about your teeth—go on" (1.49). This threat to stop the show typifies the group's "penchant for self-reflexive approaches to TV itself" (Sterritt 111). Humorous end credits appearing in the middle of episodes, pointless screen captions, and Gilliam's animations cutting sketches short all contributed to what David Sterritt calls "an oneiric intensity that spills over the boundaries of conventional comedy with extraordinary abandon" (122). A perfect example is the ending to the "Argument clinic" sketch (episode 29), in which a policeman enters, declaring:

> Now I’m arrestin’ this entire show on three counts: one, acts of self-conscious behaviour contrary to the “Not in front of the children” Act, two, always saying “It’s so and so of the Yard” every time the fuzz arrives and, three, and this is the cruncher, offences against the “Getting out of sketches without using a proper punchline” Act, four, namely, simply ending every bleedin’ sketch by just having a policeman come in and . . . wait a minute. (2.90)

At which point another policeman enters to arrest him, who is in turn apprehended by another hand coming through the door; before a sudden cut to black.

In the Python feature films, there are also numerous self-reflexive references to the conventions of film, particularly in The Holy Grail. This begins with the end credits, which change a number of times due to alleged change in personnel; there is the aptly named Sir Not-Appearing-in-this-Film, we are told that the castle Camelot shown on the screen is just a model, and the film ends with the main actors being arrested for killing an innocent bystander who had not participated in the film’s story. In The Life of Brian the self-reflexive references are scant, but extremely powerful. The most striking is the end scene, which depicts a group of people being crucified, to which Eric Idle responds with the song “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.” The Pythons savagely satirize the Hollywood way of telling Biblical stories. Their humorous use of a key Christian icon, the Crucifixion, was a deliberate “button-pushing subtext,” and the Christian community obligingly responded (Sterritt 113).[1]

The farcical elements in The Life of Brian are toned down, because here the Pythons are not unconcerned with meaning; in fact, the film has very definite meanings that the Pythons all insist on. Terry Gilliam believes that basic comedy, evoking laughter in another person, is a simple operation. He contrasts that with what he believes is the definition of The Life of Brian: “to get laughs at an intelligent level, about an important subject, that’s good” (qtd. in Yapp). An argument over what the subject of the film actually was led into controversy. Many

religious groups, from Judaism to Christianity, condemned the film as “obscene and sacrilegious,” a “scurrilous abuse of God, Christ, or the Bible,” and as “an incitement to possible violence.” The Pythons, on the other hand, maintained that the subject of the film is not Christ, but rather the kind of person who decides to blindly and ignorantly follow him, or any other authority figure. The Pythons are attacking “closed thinking,” which, according to Christopher Falzon, “appears whenever a viewpoint or a belief system becomes all-consuming and unquestionable, as for example in religious fundamentalism and political fanaticism” (202). Falzon directs us to the scene in the film where Brian tries desperately to persuade his audience that he is not the Messiah, only to be told by one of his followers: “Only the true Messiah denies his divinity.” Brian is exasperated by this blind line of logic: “What? Well, what sort of chance does that give me? All right, I am the Messiah!” His followers are elated, so Brian tells them to “fuck off.” The response of the crowd is comic writing of the highest order: “How shall we fuck off, oh Lord?” The film goes further in showing how closed systems of thinking can lead to social and political antagonisms. Running away from his fanatical followers (a common tactic in The Holy Grail), Brian loses his shoe, along with a gourd that he was given for free whilst buying a disguise to evade the Romans. His followers find these items, and elevate them to the status of religious icons. Almost immediately they begin to quarrel over their significance, one believing that everybody should wear only one shoe like the Lord, another arguing that his followers should collect shoes “in abundance,” whilst yet another focuses on the importance of the gourd. Brian’s followers are not even able to agree on whether he has left behind a shoe or a sandal. Not since Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels has the nature of religious and social schisms been so ruthlessly exposed.[2]

The tone of this chapter thus far seems to imply that the Pythons’ anarchic humor advocates further anarchy on a political and social level, and this was certainly the line taken by their most virulent critics during the time of The Life of Brian

controversy. Marcel Gutwirth would agree with those critics, but from the other side of the trenches in this fiery debate: “Laughter, in its explosiveness, is an expression of that same—briefly—unrestrained dark energy, heir to the demonic . . . which turns comedy into the unthreatening aspect of anarchy and violence” (107). It is, however, extremely doubtful whether the Pythons’ humor has ever inspired outbreaks of social violence, and this is certainly a line that they themselves have never adopted. John Cleese, surprisingly, placed the politically radical Bill Hicks at the top of his list of favorite comedians, but his comments on how successful Hicks was in effecting political change stand as a fairly accurate reflection on the supposedly radical nature of the Python’s own comedy: “Deep down, I do feel that comedy is best when it’s about something, even though it’s never changed anything. I think we should all pretend that it sometimes does” (qtd. in Yapp). Such a comment by Cleese in the early years of the twenty-first century would have come as no surprise to Stephen Wagg, who had claimed in the early nineties that the Pythons had never actively engaged in political and social issues in their comedy, and that if they did, it was usually from a position of fear and/or cruelty (272). He associates this aspect of Python comedy with British satire in general, which may seem to have definite political intentions, but very often does not. He even contends that the attitude underlying political satiric humor is akin to the conservative individualistic politics of Thatcherism in 1980s Britain. Whether this is true or not, it does reflect on another similarity between the Pythons’ work and that of the supposedly radical subversions of the Feast of Fools. The point of the festival was not to attempt to effect change in society, but to briefly kick against the pricks, before submitting once again to dominant social and political hierarchies. As Gutwirth describes it, the point of the feast was: “to disrupt an order, briefly and reversibly, in the interest of a more viable continuation of that order. Aggression is vented, so to speak, in the interests of nonaggression” (43–44). Rather than seek to transform the existing order, the feast’s job was to ensure that the hierarchies

would remain in place. Whether the same is true of Python's comedy is difficult to state with any degree of certainty, mainly due to the conflicting statements of each of the members. Whilst Cleese saw no political merit in their comedy, Chapman, as a gay advocate, had very different views, as did Eric Idle, who once proudly claimed that "I think Python shows a healthy contempt for both left and right" (qtd. in Wagg 275). Terry Jones, who as a Welshman would be expected to have a slightly different perspective on a number of political issues, believed that if the Pythons had come into being during the Thatcher years, the tone of their comedy would have been very different (qtd. in Wagg 275).

To conclude, Chapman's remarks seem to accord more with the actual material of the comedy. Political discussion itself is very often the subject of their humor, and is yet another form of "closed thinking" that reveals the comic absurdity of mankind. Whether it is the various anti-Roman factions of The Life of Brian who seem to hate one of their own factions ("the Judean People's Front?!") more than the actual Romans, or Dennis the anarcho-syndicalist spokesman more in love with his repressed state ("Help, help, I'm being repressed!") than with attempting to effect any real change, the butt of the humor is how people often fail to rise above the conditions in which they find themselves. As Brian reminds his fellow freedom fighters, "We should be struggling together!" He is promptly reminded that that is exactly what they are doing.

NOTES

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1. Those familiar with the work of Bill Hicks will be alerted to a similar point he makes about the adoption of a crucifix by Christians as their emblem. He compares it to supporters of JFK walking around with a gun pendant in commemoration of his assassination.

2. This refers to the war in Lilliput between two rival factions: one of whom believes eggs should be broken at the big end, and the other from the little end. A minor issue, one would think, however, "It is computed that seven thousand persons have, at several times, suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end" (35). Sterritt argues that the central theme of The Life of Brian is "the proneness of humanity to misapprehend and misunderstand the world" (118). It is also true of Swift, who ironically comments: "the words are these; That all true believers shall break their eggs at the convenient end; and which is the convenient end, seems, in my humble opinion, to be left to every man's conscience" (36).

Chapter 5
“How Fortunate We Are Indeed to Have Such a Poet on These Shores”

Miguel Ángel González Campos

Shakespeare, Monty Python, and the Tradition of the Wise Fool

One of the most striking features of Monty Python was their ability to blur the boundaries between high and low culture. In the Flying Circus the troupe constantly appropriated and recycled cultural icons in a quite unconventional context: a television comedy program. Famous scientists, philosophers, painters, composers, and writers were often comically portrayed in the most shocking situations and their works provided Monty Python with raw material for many sketches. Of course William Shakespeare, as one of the greatest literary figures of all time, could be no exception. Not surprisingly, there are many allusions to the Bard or his works in the Flying Circus. Overactors in a hospital playing the character of Richard III, bogus psychiatrists analyzing Prince Hamlet, the first underwater production of Measure for Measure, or an Elizabethan wife pretending to read Shakespeare while enjoying pornography are just a few examples of the continuous presence of Shakespeare in the Flying Circus.

The Bard’s presence in Monty Python, however, is not limited to references to Shakespeare himself or to characters or events from his plays. As Darl Larsen has demonstrated in his pioneering work on the subject, Monty Python, Shakespeare and English Renaissance Drama, the Pythons appropriated and revised many of the most defining structural devices and techniques of the Bard. Monty Python shares with Shakespeare certain features, such as an anachronistic approach to history which is subordinated to artistic purposes, a self-awareness in

presentation, which constantly reminds us of its artificiality, the practice of cross-dressing, or a healthy disrespect for the traditional conventions of a medium. This coincidence can hardly be accidental. Bearing in mind the educational background of the members of Monty Python, who attended either Oxford or Cambridge University (with the exception of Terry Gilliam, who attended the prestigious Occidental College in California), there is no doubt that they must have been more than familiar with Shakespeare's works. In this chapter I would like to focus on one aspect of Shakespeare's influence, which is seldom mentioned when dealing with Monty Python but which constitutes, in my opinion, one of the most interesting and fruitful sources of inspiration for the troupe: the character of the wise fool.

Of course, the literary wise fool was not Shakespeare's invention. Its origin dates back to ancient Greece, and over the centuries the character's features have been developed and established by such writers as Aesop, Cicero, St. Paul, and Erasmus. However, it is Shakespeare who gives the wise fool a reinvigorating force and relevance as a universal character by originally combining elements from the character's literary inheritance with other elements taken from medieval and early modern festivities, such as the "Lord of Misrule." The result is a new, rich, and complex figure, which, as H. F. Lippincott points out, does not resemble any other fool in the pre-Shakespearean English drama (245). This figure is nicely represented by three fools who embody the essence of the character: Touchstone in As You Like It, Feste in Twelfth Night, and the significantly unnamed fool in King Lear. It is not easy to make generalizations, since they are not identical. Shakespeare underlines or minimizes some of their features and, like most Shakespearean characters, each fool shows particular features that make him unique in a certain way. Touchstone seems a fool whose ironic but gentle attacks are never taken too seriously by his victims, and this allows him to be what is probably the most socially integrated of Shakespearean fools. He even takes part in the final celebration of the happy ending, by marrying Audrey

and becoming a part of what he has satirized. The sad Feste is particularly fascinated with the use of language and displays an amazing ability to play with words, often by means of nonsensical (or apparently nonsensical) verbal pirouettes. The "bitter Fool" in King Lear (as the king himself calls him) is the wisest and, unlike his fellow fools, lives in a tragic world far from the eventually controlled world of Comedy where disorder is just a harmless parenthesis. However, in spite of their differences there are some common elements in all of them. Significantly enough, most of those elements are also shared by Monty Python.

The first of these features is the fact that all of them were "licensed fools," that is, fools at the service of an authority (either a king or a noble household). This patronage offered protection to the fool no matter how subversive his work may be. Under the disguise of humor, fools were allowed to say unwelcome truths that could have cost knights or courtiers their heads. Humor was a kind of immunity license for them because, as Olivia says in Twelfth Night, "there is no slander in an allowed fool, though he do nothing but rail" (I.v.94–95). In this way it is not strange that the target of the fool's attacks is often the institutional power that protects him. This can be clearly seen in King Lear, where the king himself is constantly reminded of his mistakes and limitations by the fool. Monty Python started their career working for the BBC, which in the late 1960s represented an official cultural authority in Britain. However, the Pythons always felt free to satirize or lampoon the programs, attitudes, and habits of the BBC. Significantly, the BBC complained several times about matters related to obscenity but never about the attacks of the group against the company or the programmers, one of the Python's favorite targets, who must have thought that since it was just humor, people should not take it seriously. In the documentary Almost the Truth: The Lawyer's Cut, the British comedian Steve Coogan talks about the Flying Circus in a way that brings to mind the Shakespearean fool: "You can say things that ordinarily you wouldn't be able to say by having this comic license, things that

would be unacceptable if it weren't for the fact that you are making people laugh. That was your 'get out of jail' free card."

Just as Shakespearean fools are able to mock and openly criticize the king and the institutions representing power, Monty Python dared to make sketches as potentially subversive as the "Chemist's sketch" (episode 17), in which, after showing an utterly incompetent policeman, a voice-over on behalf of the BBC comically apologizes to the police for showing a policeman who is not meant to represent the average police officer. Another example is the "Court scene (multiple murderer) sketch" (episode 27), in which a confessed mass murderer calls into question the justice system by finely manipulating the judge and the jury. Besides the significant subversive reading we can make of this scene, this trademark sketch also illustrates a strategy typically used by Shakespearean fools. Namely, the apparently absurd depiction of the world in reverse, challenging the audience's expectations. As Indira Ghose points out, the fools in Shakespeare call into question our view of our own reality by offering an alternative world, a world upside down (193). Fools represent a topsy-turvy world in which the king is a fool and the fool is the king, a world in which conventional logic collapses and gives way to a distorted reality. It is the world of the unexpected that triggers laughter. This is one of the basic principles of the Python universe. A ministry that promotes the development of silly walks, grannies bullying young men and assaulting people in the streets, or the image of the "Pepperpots" discussing Jean Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy—these are fine examples of Monty Python's inverted expectations.

Shakespearean fools and Monty Python share an uncommon gift to defamiliarize the familiar by distorting the image of the world. In this sense both are quite close to the carnivalesque spirit, Mikhail Bahktin's term for a particular kind of medieval comedy. This term implies the notion of the grotesque, the inversion of roles and the subversion of an established order through humor and chaos. It is significant that this concept of the carnivalesque, which has been widely used by critics to

describe the role of the Shakespearean fool, has also become a common reference in studies of the Pythons, such as those by Marcia Landy or Ellen Bishop, the latter of whom states that "the Monty Python troupe is reinscribing the carnivalesque spirit in popular culture" (54).

One of the most interesting aspects of this carnivalesque concept is that, beyond laughter and a comic atmosphere, it represents "a serious way of understanding the world" (Bishop 50). The grotesque and distorting perspective of the carnival makes possible a different view of reality. In Shakespeare's plays that new perception provides the fool with a kind of insight seldom shared by other characters in the play. As Lippincot affirms, the fool has the ability to exist simultaneously in two worlds, that of the wise and that of the foolish (247). The result is the paradox of the wise fool who, behind the mask of folly and nonsense, displays an uncommon knowledge unreachable for the so-called "ordinary" characters. Shakespearean fools seem to have a different awareness of reality and they enlighten other characters who are deceived by appearances. As Touchstone reminds us in As You Like It, "the fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man/ knows himself to be a fool" (V.i.29–30). Consequently, it is no wonder that in Twelfth Night Viola says, referring to Feste, that "this fellow is wise enough to play the fool" (III.i.60). The fool as a character is another deceiving appearance since his apparently nonsensical comments often reveal sensible reflections and profound truths.

Monty Python also makes frequent use of this strategy. In many sketches we find situations that at first glance seem nothing but absurd. But when we look deeper we discover a concealed meaning. Let's take the sketch on Hamlet in episode forty-three, for example, where the young prince visits a group of psychiatrists to confess that he has always wanted to be a private detective. The psychiatrists are not interested in his words and instead project their own sexual fantasies onto him. On the surface we have a funny, crazy situation which anybody not familiar with Shakespeare's tragedy could still enjoy. However, beyond the apparently absurd anachronism, Hamlet's

wish to become a private eye turns out to be an appropriate update of one of the main roles of the prince in the play. He has to investigate his father's death and, before performing any further action, needs to find evidence against his uncle and to determine the degree of involvement of his mother in the crime. Besides, this sketch represents a figure who tries to escape from rigid expectations developed over centuries; on a deeper level, this apparently silly version of Hamlet is a clever commentary on the bad habits of literary criticism and on how critics have frequently dissected the character by approaching him from preconceived positions.

In the same way, behind the scene of the famous historian killed by a knight at the end of Monty Python and The Holy Grail there is also an interesting reminder that we are not watching "official history." And this moment can also be seen as a metaphorical rebellion of the past against those who artificially recreate it, suggesting a rich subtext about the tensions between "past" and "history." This apparently absurd sketch illustrates on a deeper level the conflict between actual past facts and their artificial reconstruction. This questioning of the validity of history as an objective reproduction of the past is a key issue of postmodern art, as critics such as Linda Hutcheon have pointed out.

One more example of this pseudo-absurdist approach is the sketch where the pope complains to Michelangelo about the Last Supper, which he has just painted with twenty-eight disciples, three Christs, and a kangaroo. Apart from the possible implications about censorship or artistic license, it is significant that this apparently surreal moment is actually based on real events. In 1573, Paolo Veronese was accused by the Roman Inquisition because his version of The Last Supper for the Basilica de Saint Giovanni presented a cat, a jester, several drunken Germans, dwarfs, and a parrot. Eventually he was forced to rename his painting The Feast in the House of Levi. The apparently nonsensical world of the Pythons, like that of the wise fools, repays deeper looking with deeper meanings.

Another defining feature of the wise fools is their use of language. As Vicky Janick points out, fools use a "striking

language. As Vicky Janick points out, fools use a "strikingly unusual speech" characterized by "more wordplay, more rhetorical figures and [more] forms of argument, reasoning and disputation" (13). Robert Graves carried out an interesting study on the rhetoric of the fool and concluded that his style is based mainly on three literary devices (73), devices that are used by Monty Python on countless occasions. The first of those devices is the pun, an excellent tactic to express two meanings simultaneously. The Python sketch "The funniest joke in the world" (episode 1) is an example of this, the lethal joke which gives rise to the whole situation itself just a pun: "'My dog's got no nose.' 'How does he smell?' 'Awful'" (1.12).

The second typical literary device used by the Shakespearean fool is paradox, which is used by Shakespeare not only to play with contradictions but also to "highlight the fracture of received opinion and ordinary logic" (Platt 15). Again it is not difficult to find in the Pythons frequent examples of paradoxes through which a character really puzzles the audience, as we can see in the "Piston engine" sketch (episode forty-three), where Mrs. Smoker and Mrs. Non-smoker have a conversation in terms of "'Been shopping?' 'Nope . . . I've been shopping'" (2.305), or the sketch in which someone affirms that he has invented an artifact to sit on the floor but above.

The third device mentioned by Graves is the syllogism which seeks to prove validity and not truth and is consequently well-suited for manipulation (73–74). Touchstone uses this in As You Like It when he tries to convince Corin the shepherd that he is damned because he never went to court: "If thou never wast at court, thou never sawest good manners; if thou never sawest good manners, then thy manners must be wicked; and wickedness is sin, and sin is damnation" (III.ii.32–34). A syllogism like this brings to mind the trial scene in The Holy Grail when Sir Bedevere reveals how to identify a witch:

> BEDEVERE: There are ways of telling whether she is a witch.
> CROWD: Are there? What are they? Tell us!
> BEDEVERE: Tell me, what do you do with witches?
> CROWD: Burn, burn them up!

BEDEVERE: And what do you burn apart from witches?
VILLAGER 1: More witches!
VILLAGER 2: Wood!
BEDEVERE: So, why do witches burn?
VILLAGER 3: . . . Because they’re made of wood . . . ?
BEDEVERE: Good!
BEDEVERE: So, how do we tell whether she is made of wood?
VILLAGER 1: Build a bridge out of her.
BEDEVERE: Aah, but can you not also make bridges out of stone?
VILLAGER 2: Oh, yeah.
BEDEVERE: Does wood sink in water?
VILLAGER 1: No, no.
VILLAGER 2: It floats! It floats! . . .
BEDEVERE: What also floats in water? . . .
ARTHUR: A duck.
BEDEVERE: Exactly! So, logically . . . ,
VILLAGER 1: If . . . she . . . weighs the same as a duck . . . she’s made of wood.
BEDEVERE: And therefore?
CROWD: A witch!

Another common rhetorical strategy used by both Shakespearean fools and Monty Python is the tu quoque, that is, “you too.” As Graves points out, in Shakespeare “the fool’s traditional function has been to demonstrate that the other person, whatever his pretensions to wit may be, is likewise a fool” (73). By the use of his folly the fool reminds the listener that he is also a fool, and still worse, that he is an unaware fool who needs another fool to carry out his own process of self-recognition. This also seems to be the underlying principle in most of Python’s works. To deflate the pompous authority of those who exert power (either political, religious, military, or academic) by reducing it to the absurd is just a reminder that nobody is exempt from foolishness. The wise fool is the character who can recognize more easily life’s mask of

absurdity and that is probably why, as Jan Kott points out, “the fool knows that the only true madness is to recognize this world as rational” (167).

Life is cruel and irrational, as Shakespearean fools (and Monty Python) seem to know so well. The hilarious and enjoyable topsy-turvy world created by both is in a way just a mask to cover the face of the horrible monster of reality. Significantly enough, the Pythons never offered a conventional happy ending in their long narrative works: Arthur never found the Grail, Brian is crucified, and The Meaning of Life ends with death. “Life’s a piece of shit when you look at it,” as Eric Idle reminds us in “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life,” a song that perfectly represents the philosophy of the Shakespearean fool: comedy is the only possible way to deal effectively with the cruel and meaningless tragedy of life. This pessimistic view of human nature, shared by both the Pythons and the Shakespearean fools, is ironically what pushes them towards comedy, both reflecting the absurdity of human experience through humor. An aspect that increases the pessimism of both Shakespearean fools and the Pythons is the lack of an alternative solution. They are not social reformers who offer a utopian world or a moralist example to imitate. They know they cannot change the world so they use their subversive energy to underline comically how absurd it is.

As I have tried to show in this chapter, in spite of their different chronological and artistic contexts, Shakespearean fools and Monty Python share certain defining features related to their purposes, common modes of philosophy, language, and strategy which can hardly be considered accidental. In a way, Monty Python may have found in the figure of the Shakespearean wise fool an inspirational model for presenting an apparently absurd universe which, on a deeper level, is impregnated with their meaningful subversive efforts. In this sense, Robert Hillis Goldsmith says: “The fool . . . was something more than a humorous entertainer. He was also the licensed critic of his master” (7). It is significant that Terry Gilliam uses similar words to describe the work of the Pythons when he says: “We’ve got to maintain a certain level of offence;

when he says: "We've got to maintain a certain level of offence, otherwise, we're just entertainers" (qtd. in Hewison 95).

In documentaries and interviews with Python members, the question of who could have been the seventh Python has often been raised. Neil Innes or Carol Cleveland are often proposed. However, Terry Jones, in the six-hour documentary Almost the Truth: The Lawyer's Cut, says that sometimes he could visualize that mysterious seventh member as an imaginary presence, which he calls Mister Python, who embodies the true spirit and essence of the troupe. Bearing in mind the parallelism between the Shakespearean fool and the Pythons, it is pleasing to imagine that mysterious Mr. Python as an inspiring force in motley, a fool's cap with bells on his head and a mock scepter in his hands.

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Chapter 6
The Village Idiot and His Relation to the Unconscious

Tomasz Dobrogoszcz

Freud published his seminal study of the anatomy of humor, Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten (The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious),[1] in 1905, at a rather early stage of his international career. It appeared only ten years after Studies in Hysteria, an inaugural work in the theory of psychoanalysis, and only five years after The Interpretation of Dreams, the book that established the foundations of his way of understanding the notion of the unconscious and its outward manifestations. The Joke, which consistently emphasizes the foundations of the humorous in the recesses of the unconscious, is a logical continuation of the study of dreams. In 1927 Freud slightly revised his theory of the comic in a short work entitled Humour, being now able to incorporate the new terminology compatible with his famous Superego-Ego-Id triad. Nonetheless, it is The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious which remains his most comprehensive and most significant study of the subject. And even though certain critics point out a degree of inconsistency and circularity in Freud's argument there (Palmer 81–87), The Joke continues to be the most renowned and most widely referred to psychoanalytical approach to the nature of humor.

This chapter investigates the techniques of humor exercised by Monty Python's Flying Circus from the perspective of Freud's approach presented in The Joke. Applying this theory to the whole artistic output of the Pythons would be a task exceeding the scope available here. Thus, I have limited my analysis twofold: first, to the Flying Circus TV shows alone, and second, to the comic representations of madness in them. The discussion presents the gist of Freud's work, outlines the portrayal of madness in Monty Python programs, and tries to make an analytic connection between them.

FREUD, THE JOKE, AND THE NONSENSICAL

Beginning his study with the analysis of the techniques and tendencies of the joke, Freud observes that joking "is an activity whose aim it is to obtain pleasure from psychical processes—intellectual or otherwise" (91). One of the main claims of The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious is that there is "a far-reaching correspondence . . . between the devices of the joke-work and those of the dream-work," which, as the author maintains, is "hardly . . . accidental" (75). In line with the "principle of aesthetic support . . . or intensification" (129), Freud holds that the function of the joke is "to lift internal inhibitions and make sources of pleasure which these had made inaccessible flow freely once more" (125). Making an important distinction between verbal and intellectual jokes, the study nevertheless underlines that both types are deeply set in the unconscious:

> The interesting processes of condensation with substitute-formation which we have recognized to be the core of the joke-technique in verbal jokes pointed us towards the formation of dreams, for the same psychical processes have been discovered in the mechanism of work there. But that is the very same direction to which the techniques of intellectual jokes also point—displacement, faulty thinking, absurdity, indirect representation, representation by the opposite—and all of these without exception recur in the dream-work. (75)

Many of the joke techniques enumerated in the study pertain to the structure of sketches appearing in Monty Python shows. Importantly, absurdity, mentioned in the above quotation, seems central to many skits from the Flying Circus programs—the Pythons have been famous for their use of nonsense, and the humor exercised in their shows is inextricably connected with it. Marcia Landy notes that "this form of comedy, often identified as 'stream of consciousness,'

‘surreal,’ ‘nonsensical,’ or ‘carnivalesque,’ challenges logical categories and received conceptions of the world”; for her, “nonsense becomes a higher form of sense” in the Python comedy (3). The use of nonsense in jokes is of crucial importance for Freud. He notices that “in serious life, ‘pleasure of nonsense’ . . . is concealed to the point of vanishing” (120), and that the technique of jokes very often resorts to the use of absurdity and numerous foolish and nonsensical issues (48), citing here Lichtenberg, who discovers “that cats should have two holes cut in their fur in the very place where they have eyes” (49). Freud goes on to argue that the pleasure the child derives from his/her playful experiments with language—distorting words, making new word combinations—gives him/her the incentive to indulge in such games, knowing “in the consciousness that they are nonsensical,” so that he/she “discovers enjoyment in the charm of what the reason forbids [and] makes use of play to escape the pressure of critical reason” (120–21). The mind activity evoked by the joke is parallel: “The thought, plunging into the unconscious in order to form a joke is . . . for a moment . . . transposed back to the childish stage, in order to repossess the childish source of pleasure” (164). By means of suppressing the fetters of rational thought, the joking adult is able to recreate the form of pleasure annihilated by the oppression of censoring maturity. Thus the child in an adult laughs heartily when the adult would be embarrassed even to grin. Consequently, the disguise of a joke is often used to direct our mockery at people, institutions, or ideas which would not be ridiculed otherwise (104). One such “institution” lampooned in Monty Python’s Flying Circus is madness.

PYTHON’S FLYING MADNESS

The array of representations of lunacy in the Python shows is remarkably broad: from the silliest harmless cretins to raving psychotics. The Flying Circus presents numerous examples of acutely disturbed individuals gone berserk, including a TV

commentator exploding with hatred for communists, and a martial arts instructor going bananas about being attacked with fresh fruit. Another example from the dangerous end of the insanity scale is the homicidal barber from the episode “The Ant, An Introduction” (episode 9). A totally unobservant customer insists on having a haircut, involving the use of the razor, blind to the fact that the barber is wearing an obviously bloodstained apron, has shaking hands, and mumbles “Cut, cut, cut, blood, spurt, artery, murder, Hitchcock, Psycho” (1.113). He finds it hard to stop himself from plunging his scissors into the customer’s body, but helps keep control with occasional swigs of liquor. His psychosis is rooted in an uncontrollable fear of hair being cut, an anxiety he has suffered since childhood. The condition was aggravated by his mother, who arranged a barber’s career for him, even though he dreamt of becoming a lumberjack, his secret wish being to “put on women’s clothing and hang around in bars” (1.115).[2]

By contrast, at the other end of the madness scale there are patently absurd and nonsensical cases, definitely unrelated to any specific medical mental condition and posing no threat to the world outside. Such lunatics are nicely exemplified in “Spot the Loony” (episode 38). This sketch is a parody of a phone-in show in which viewers are shown a series of pictures and must ring up the presenter when they see a cretin in one of them. Appropriately, the members of the jury panel are “the Swedish mammal abuser and part-time radiator,” “Dame Elsie Occluded, historian, wit, bon viveur, and rear half of the Johnson brothers” and “Miles Yellowbird . . . the golfer and inventor of Catholicism” (2.223). Obviously, they are all loonies. A similar sketch, “Ideal Loon Exhibition” (episode 37), appears in the previous episode of the show. The exhibition is a pseudo-artistic freak show, hosting “numb-
skulls and boobies from all over the country,” who demonstrate feats of “sheer pointless behaviour” in front of large crowds of visitors. The loonies vary from a man “suspended over a tin of condemned veal” (2.204), through the Free French Osteopaths, Italian priests in custard, one of the Royal Canadian Mounted

Geese, to judges parading up a cat-walk for a beauty contest.[3] Both examples demonstrate cases of idiocy that are utterly nonsensical, but perfectly harmless.

Not all presentations of insanity in the Flying Circus are so benign, though. Sometimes a mentally impaired individual is clearly abused; for instance, the retarded boxer, Ken Clean-Air System (episode 18). Ken displays many severe, but purely nonsensical and thus comical, symptoms of mental handicap. Most of them are connected with his training regime, e.g., "Every morning at his little three-room semi near Reading, Ken gets up at three o'clock . . . and goes back to bed again because it's far too early" (1.245), or "Every morning, he jogs the forty-seven miles from his . . . house in Reigate, to the Government's Pesticide Research Centre at Shoreham. Nobody knows why" (1.244). Others relate to his nourishment habits: "For breakfast every day, Ken places a plate of liver and bacon under his chair, and locks himself in the cupboard" (1.245), and "For lunch Ken crouches down in the road and rubs gravel into his hair" (1.246). But the idiocy of the boxer provides financial gain for his assisting crew. One shot shows his manager driven in a Rolls-Royce, and as he passes he cursorily remarks: "The great thing about Ken is that he's almost totally stupid" (1.244). Ken's personal trainer takes sadistic pleasure in waking him up by means of "a steel peg driven into his skull with a mallet" (1.245). And when Ken is sent on his many-mile jogs, the trainer seizes the opportunity to be alone in the house with Mrs. Clean-Air System.

Even more ruthless exploitation of a mentally handicapped person is seen in the relation between Ron Obvious and his manager Luigi Vercotti, in "The first man to jump the channel" (episode 10). Ron is obviously a halfwit, whereas Mr. Vercotti, the epitome of an Italian mafia racketeer,[4] lives off the money provided by the official sponsors of Ron's undertakings. When Obvious attempts to jump across the English Channel, he is supposed to carry "half a hundredweight of [the] bricks" provided by "Chippenham Brick Company" (1.128), which invests its money in advertising its product in this way. No

wonder the mission is not accomplished. But because Ron is so stupid, he is not discouraged by failure. Vercotti becomes efficient at finding sponsors and the duo cooperates very successfully on a number of painfully unsuccessful and heavily injurious projects: eating Chichester Cathedral, tunneling from England to Java or, climactically, running to Mercury. Ron's last feat, also managed by Vercotti, is to "break the world record for remaining underground" (1.129); it takes place, obviously, in the cemetery.

One of the most conspicuously bizarre and nonsensical character types reappearing in Monty Python's Flying Circus are the Gumbies. They pop up in numerous episodes, even if very briefly, and have become one of the show's trademarks. The Gumby character is described by Wilmut as "a brainless sub-human with rolled-up trousers, round steel-rimmed spectacles, braces, a small moustache, and a handkerchief with the corners knotted as a head piece" (qtd. in Landy 97). They speak by means of a loud, coarse, and rather indistinct chant, display utter incomprehension of virtually anything around them, and perform ludicrously pointless actions. For Landy, the Gumbies are "another Python strategy to assault the common sense of audience response" (97). This is emphasized by the position of authority given to them by the context in which they are placed by the Pythons. The Gumbies are usually presented as part of the intelligentsia, most often recognized as "professors" by on-screen captions, and they are asked for an expert opinion in all sorts of matters, either very trivial, about the proper way to arrange flowers, or more specialized, about the actual location of the Battle of Trafalgar. In the opinion of Prof. J. R. Gumby, the battle was fought not in the Atlantic off southern Spain, but near Cudworth in Yorkshire (episode 11):

> CANNING (voice over): What makes you think the Battle of Trafalgar was fought near Cudworth?
> There is a long pause.
> GUMBY: Because . . . Drake . . . was . . . too . . . clever for . . . the German . . . fleet.

CANNING (voice over): I beg your pardon?
GUMBY: . . . Oh, I've forgotten what I said now. (1.145)

Despite suggestions that the Gumbies can be interpreted as a satirical picture of television experts and an over-intellectualized British academia, it seems more feasible that, given the highly absurd dimension of their stupidity, the most powerful comic potential of those characters lies in the sheer nonsense of their madness. This can be illustrated by the confession of the Gumby crooner:

> Well I think television's killed real entertainment. In the old days we used to make our own fun. At Christmas parties I used to strike myself on the head repeatedly with blunt instruments while crooning. (sings) "Only make believe, I love you," (hits himself on head with bricks) "Only make believe that you love me" (hits himself). (episode 9, 1.116)

The Gumby situation is taken to extremes when Mr. T. F. Gumby visits a brain specialist, another Gumby, to inform him "My brain hurts!"[5] (episode 32). The patient is subsequently taken to a brain surgeon, yet another Gumby, who, accompanied by a rather numerous operating team of Gumbies, performs surgery with a mallet, a saw, and other "surgical" instruments, anesthetic being provided by striking the patient over the head with a large gas cylinder. Typically, as in all Gumby sketches, the characters reveal a jaw-dropping imbecility and lack of social skills.

A similar decisive (and incisive) therapy is suggested and executed in the sketch "Agatha Christie" (episode 11), where Inspector Tiger has developed a speech impediment and cannot get the grammar of his sentences right. The medication he is given does not solve the problem, so a doctor, assisted by two nurses, performs a lobotomy with a common saw. The procedure is perfectly successful and Inspector Tiger, his head in bandages, is able to resume his investigations unhindered.

As can be seen, then, Monty Python's Flying Circus portrays

not only madness itself, but also the possible ways of treating it. The above examples show surgical solutions to mental problems, but the Pythons also present a psychoanalytical approach. In the sketch “Psychiatry” (episode 13), Mr. Notlob complains about “hearing guitars playing and people singing when there’s no one around,” and the psychiatrist’s diagnosis suggests he is suffering from “auditory hallucinations” (1.175). In this case, however, surgical treatment also proves necessary after the second opinion of another doctor reveals the true nature of the ailment: Mr. Notlob has in fact a flesh-and-blood musical band of squatters in his belly.

Another instance of a psychiatrist at work appears in the sketch “Psychiatrist milkman” (episode 16), where Eric Idle, dressed as a milkman and driving a milkman’s van, offers door-to-door psychoanalytical consultations while delivering dairy products. The company he represents is Psychiatrist’s Dairy Ltd.; its competitors are Jersey Cream Psychiatrists. Idle offers the patient what he calls “just a pat diagnosis made without first obtaining [his] full medical history,” which nicely responds to the complaint lodged by an office psychiatrist about television shows portraying “psychiatrists who make pat diagnoses of patients’ problems without first obtaining their full medical history” (1.216). Idle’s psychiatrist-milkman lampoons a traditional Freudian method of treatment, diagnosing a female patient’s “repressive libido complex, probably the product of an unhappy childhood, coupled with acute insecurity in adolescence, which has resulted in an attenuation of the libido complex,” and suggesting that she should visit his dairy, if not to cure her complex, at least to “give hundreds of lower-paid workers a good laugh” (1.215).

In some Flying Circus skits psychiatrists suggest hospital treatment. In episode twenty-five, “Spam,” we are shown into a hospital for people suffering from overacting. Interestingly, all residents of the hospital wear costumes adequate to their actual predisposition: there are a couple of men dressed as Long John Silver, others disguised as King Rat. Finally, we are led into “the Richard III Ward,” with every patient wearing the king’s costume

and repeating “A horse. A horse. My kingdom for a horse” (2.26). The Pythons seem thus fairly dispassionate, ridiculing insanity and its medical treatment, both surgical and psychoanalytical, individual and institutionalized.

THE VILLAGE IDIOT

Insofar as madness remains one of the most frequent objects of ridicule in the Flying Circus, we might assume the presence of an underlying motif in Pythons’ irony. For the purpose of investigating it, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the sketch “The Idiot in Society” (episode 20). This sketch introduces Arthur Figgis, a person who has a rather original occupation of village idiot. It begins as a mock-documentary: Figgis, sitting on a wall, dressed in a tattered straw hat and a long, coarse smock, his hair disheveled, is interviewed by a BBC crew. He is talking logically and creates the impression of an intelligent, well-educated person. In his erudite speech, he discusses his profession, idiocy, describing it as a serious and socially useful vocation. But whenever a member of his rural community passes by, Figgis switches to incomprehensible babbling and starts making silly faces. Alone in front of the camera again, he resumes his reflective exposition. Then the documentary portrays his life as the village idiot, presenting several of his daily routines, for instance, showing him splash his clothes with mud to create a professional outfit for a day’s work. The crew also follows him into a bank, where, instead of money, which he would not accept, he takes “bits of string, wood, dead budgerigars, sparrows . . . a piece of moss, or a dead vole” (1.273). We also learn that Figgis is not an ordinary idiot. He lectures on idiocy at the University of East Anglia, where, after three years of study, graduates receive “a diploma of idiocy, a handful of mud [over their face] and a kick on the head” (1.273). The documentary finally reveals that there are city idiots within the society, too, not just village idiots. The two types differ in costume: the traditional village idiot outfit is replaced in cities by black business suits and bowler hats.

Michelle Spinelli, in her article “Madness in Monty Python’s Flying Circus,” uses the portrayal of the village idiot, Arthur Figgis, to talk about madness as a social construct, employing the perspective of Michel Foucault on the modern history of madness in the West (mainly from Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason). She notes that “The label ‘village idiot,’ which imputes some kind of madness, is meaningless outside the society that created it” (154). Foucault himself stresses that insanity only exists as a socially fabricated concept: “Madness cannot be found in a raw state. Madness only exists in society. It does not exist outside the forms of sensibility that isolate it and the forms of repulsion that exclude or capture it” (qtd. in Spinelli 154). He observes that it was only in the seventeenth century that the position of the insane in the Western societies became one of exclusion and confinement. The Age of Reason brought what Foucault labels the “Great Confinement,” where the new urbanized society began to ostracize the insane and put them in asylums under the label of “mental disease.” Previously, the tradition of “the wise fool,” so vivid during the Renaissance, facilitated the dialogue between reason and unreason. But “beginning with the seventeenth century, unreason in the most general sense no longer had much instructive value” (Foucault 74). Classical man’s madness “was only unreason’s empirical form” (78), but this status as a substantial human function was later marginalized. Foucault further claims that madness has been detached from its truth and it was only Freud who “went back to madness at the level of its language” (188).

As Spinelli divulges, even though the Pythons’ idiot is part of contemporary society, he interacts with it. It is quite apparent, she claims, that Arthur Figgis, with his “rosy cheeks, dishevelled red hair, . . . dirty smock and straw hat . . . is the embodiment of madness as it existed, in Foucault’s analysis, before the Great Confinement” (157). Spinelli goes on to conclude that “Unlike Foucault’s assessment of madmen as variously compartmentalized or ostracized by reasonable society, [Pythons’] madmen are socially integrated. Figgis is right that he is serving an important social function” (158).

he is serving an important social function" (158).

In point of fact, at the very beginning of the mock-documentary, Figgis addresses the camera with the following sociological observation:

> Well, I feel very keenly that the idiot is a part of the old village system, and as such has a vital role to play in a modern rural society, because you see . . . there is this very real need in society for someone whom almost anyone can look down on and ridicule. . . . And this is the role . . . that I and members of my family have fulfilled in this village for the past four hundred years. . . . And so you see the idiot does provide a vital psycho-social service for this community. (1.272)

The commentator then adds, "Like the doctor, the blacksmith, the carpenter, Mr. Figgis is an important figure in this village" (1.272).

"JOKE-WORK"

We can grasp the significance of this "psycho-social service to community" and understand why the village idiot is such an "important figure" if we turn to Freud's theory of the joke. When Freud discusses what he refers to as the tendentious joke, he focuses on two categories, among others. One of them is bawdry, a type of joke treating of matters sexual, the other, jokes expressing hostility towards your enemy. Freud sees bawdry as "the equivalent of an attempt at seduction" (92), and he notes that bawdy jokes are very popular among "common people," but "when we rise into the more cultivated society . . . we find the addition of the formal requirements for jokes. The bawdry becomes witty, and is tolerated only if it is witty" (95). As for the other category, when we wish to attack our enemy, we have to resort to joking, since civilization has demanded that we "give up expressing hostility by our actions" (98). Instead, "The joke will allow us to turn to good account those ridiculous features in our enemy that the presence of opposing obstacles

would not let us utter aloud or consciously; again, that is, it will get around restrictions and open up sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible" (98, emphasis original). Furthermore, it is also a feature of "joke-work," like dream-work strategies, to involve play with language. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in this way jokes allow us to "escape the pressure of critical reason," overcome the censorship of decorum, and regain, even if only for a moment, the lost "childish pleasure" in laugher.

If we consider typical butts of Monty Python's jokes, we find that our laughter is often far from politically correct. In one of the sketches from the second Fliegender Zirkus, the objects of ridicule are two handicapped shopkeepers. One character, played by John Cleese, sells hearing aids despite being almost completely deaf, while the other, played by Michael Palin, sells contact lenses despite being nearly blind. They are both desperately unsuccessful, and exceedingly hilarious. The comicality of such characters is largely due to the fact that the objects of mockery themselves create a specific context in which we find that they deserve being ridiculed. After all, does a blind or deaf person really have to pursue such a career? Those specific circumstances make it possible for the audience to overcome a censoring barrier and set their joke-work in motion. As Freud puts it, "The insult takes place, because it is possible to make a joke with it" (130).

There are similar "extenuating circumstances" every time we laugh at the insane presented in Monty Python's Flying Circus. They are also ridiculed, but they are first put in a nonsensical context, which detaches them from reality. Ken Clean-Air System is a clown rather than a mentally handicapped person. Clowns are obviously hilarious and there is nothing politically incorrect about ridiculing them. Noël Carroll, the author of "What Mr. Creosote Knows About Laughter," sees the essence of laughing at clowns in their dehumanization. He says that Mr. Creosote from Monty Python's The Meaning of Life

> resembles that staple of slapstick comedy, the clown. The clown is not exactly human. With respect of our norms for

> clown is not exactly human. With respect to our norms for the average human, the clown is either too fat or too tall, too thin or too short. His mouth is painted to appear exaggeratedly large and his eyes and head are often too small. He is a misproportioned human. Nor are his cognitive skills near the norm; generally he is stupid. And his body can also take abuse that no actual person could. He can be hit on the head with a sledge hammer and suffer no more than a dizzy swoon where the rest of us would be hospitalized with a concussion. He takes falls with abandon and always pops up for another slam. It is as if his bones were made of rubber. Instead of breaking, they snap back into place. (31)

Freud certainly agrees that we find clowns hilarious "because they appear disproportionate and impracticable. We are laughing at an over-great expenditure" (183). But the laughter is still caused by the child inside us:

> The child laughs for pure pleasure under various circumstances which we [adults] feel are "comic," though we are unable to identify the motives for our feeling, whereas the child's motives are clear and stateable. For example, if someone slips and falls in the street, we laugh because this impression—why, we do not know—is comical. The child will laugh out of a feeling of superiority or schadenfreude: "You've fallen down—I haven't." We adults seem to have lost some of the motives for pleasure the child has and, instead, under the same circumstances, we are aware of the "comic" feeling as a substitute for what we have lost. (216–17)

Taking this perspective allows us to reexamine one of the classic Python skits—"Upperclass Twit of the Year" (episode 12). The sketch presents an absurd competition in which a few upper-class imbeciles compete on a sort of a steeplechase track, where they perform a number of nonsensical tasks: jumping over a matchbox wall, kicking a beggar, driving a car over an old lady, abusing a waiter, shooting immobilized rabbits

over an old lady, abusing a waiter, shooting immobilized rabbits, taking bras off dummies, until they finally shoot themselves to win. In this distinctly uproarious skit we laugh at nothing other than a group of mentally handicapped gentlemen who engage in acts of violence and end in self-slaughter (mental deficiency being the means by which the Pythons target a putatively inbred, inane upper stratum of English society). But our unconscious very well understands Freud's definition: "Comic is what is not proper for the grown-ups" (220).

CONCLUSION

In their television shows and in feature films, the Pythons ridiculed a number of topics that have usually been treated with reverence. The group often was the source of controversy over certain issues considered "delicate" and "problematic," such as religion, for instance. Among the risky topics of their mockery they did not spare madness, which, as we have seen, is abundantly pictured in the Flying Circus programs. But in lampooning all those "controversial" issues, the Pythons help us, as Freud would put it, "understand the comic as the 'lost laughter of childhood' regained" (217). Through this, we would probably agree that they "provide a vital psycho-social service for [the] community," allowing us to overcome the inhibitions barring our amusement. Their "service" is thus compared to that of the village idiot.

NOTES

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1. The translation by James Strachey, used in the standard edition of Freud's works, is entitled Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. This chapter uses a new translation by Joyce Crick, which appeared in 2002 with a slightly altered title.
2. The barber-would-be-lumberjack could himself be an interesting case for Freudian analysis, but this idea is not explored in the sketch.
3. Sketches involving effeminate judges, often transvestites, frequently recur in the Flying Circus. This is yet another interesting case for psychoanalysis.
4. Vercotti reappears in the series several times in a similar role.
5. "My brain hurts!" has become a real Gumby catchphrase.

Part III
Monty Python Goes Abroad

Chapter 7
The British Look Abroad: Monty Python and the Foreign

Tomasz Dobrogoszcz

In Monty Python, Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama Darl Larsen makes a daring comparison between the British comic troupe and the Bard of Avon, asserting that they are “two . . . still living and breathing cultural artifacts that defined Englishness and helped renew that same cultural essentialism” (6). Larsen claims that Shakespeare’s status as the national poet of England is mirrored by the position of the Pythons, given the correspondence between the popularity and cultural absorption of these two ubiquitous phenomena, and between their audiences, who were watching the performances “for much the same reasons and seeing much the same spectacle” (19). If we follow Larsen, there is a proportionate cult status for the Globe plays and the unprecedented television comedy show.

Notwithstanding its success abroad, Monty Python’s Flying Circus was originally produced for the BBC, which meant that it was a thoroughly British program, based on observations of British life, society, and institutions. (The Pythons leave contemporary Britain in their first two film productions—Monty Python and the Holy Grail is set in an inconsistently imaginary “England A.D. 932,” teeming with inaccuracies and anachronisms, while Life of Brian seeks the roots of Christianity in a subverted Palestine around the time of Christ—but they return “home” in The Meaning of Life.) For many, the group’s oeuvre satirizes the very essence of Britishness. Larsen stresses the huge scope of the Pythonian comedy: “The cultural and historical energies employed by Monty Python encompassed all of British history—including prominent names, dates and events—and literature, the arts, politics and popular culture” (Shakespeare 19). But even though the Pythons’ irony is frequently directed at universal themes, whenever the sketches

become more particular about social and cultural topics, they do so by delving into British issues. It is also true that people of other nationalities appear in the shows, but they are always in the position of “the Other,” as seen through British eyes. This chapter takes a closer look at this British, or perhaps English, gaze at the foreign.

BRITISHNESS?

To be precise, the perspective of the Pythons’ irony is more English than British. If the skits have a specific British location, they are set in England, not in other parts of the UK; if the characters do not speak RP but parody regional accents, these are mostly English accents. When the Flying Circus refers to Scottish or Welsh customs, clothes, or festivals, it delicately distances itself from them, treating them as examples of “regional otherness.” But, interestingly, not all non-English Brits are treated equally. As Larsen argues, “Scotsmen (and not the Welsh or Irish) [are] consistent targets for the Pythons” (Utterly Complete 80). An example of this tendency is the sketch “A Scotsman on a horse” (episode 6), a parody of the runaway bride story, where, in a last-minute disruption of a wedding ceremony in a small kirk, a Scotsman (John Cleese) abducts from the altar . . . another Scotsman (Michael Palin)—both men in what is commonly taken to be the national costume. The otherness of the Scottish is most strongly emphasized in “Man turns into a Scotsman” (episode 7), a mock-science-fiction sketch, in which an alien spaceship sends down uncanny rays that convert law-abiding English citizens into Scotsmen. The result of the transformation is always the same—a broadly stereotypical Scotsman, with a kilt and a red beard, darting away (presumably north) to the sound of bagpipe music—irrespective of who was transformed: an average man, a policeman investigating his transformation, a woman pushing a pram, the baby in the pram, or a black jazz musician. The interrogation of the first victim’s wife abounds in ironical stereotypes:

INSPECTOR: And, er, he never showed any inclination towards being a Scotsman before this happened?
WIFE: No, no, not at all. He was not that sort of person . . .
INSPECTOR: He didn't wear a kilt or play the bagpipes? . . . He never got drunk at night or brought home black puddings? . . . He didn't have an inadequate brain capacity? (1.85)

Curiously, the newspaper headline reporting the first such event reads "Man turns into a Scotsman," which already gives the transformation a peculiar undertone, as if being Scottish meant belonging to a different species. For Larsen, "a Scotsman in this Python sketch (and elsewhere throughout the Python work) is relegated to Otherness because he is less than a man" (Shakespeare 175).

Another curious issue is that both the Pythons' national references and their political satire quite carefully omit the Irish question. This might seem surprising, given the fact that the production of the Flying Circus programs coincided with a violent period of the Troubles (the first BBC broadcasts were in October 1969, just after the riots in Derry in August 1969). Larsen suggests a possible reason: "It may be that since so many deaths were associated with the struggle in Northern Ireland . . . the issue had become politically taboo, especially in the Light Entertainment division" (Utterly Complete 399). However, this silence might have been caused by the Pythons' tact and politeness. We find a clue in one of the very few references to the Troubles in the series, and perhaps the most direct one, the sketch "Our Eamonn" (episode 31). In it, a son returning from Ireland to his English family is portrayed as "a huge African warrior in war paint" (2.111), and even though everyone asks him "How was Dublin?" no one is really interested in his story, and he never goes beyond "there does seem some hope of a constitutional settlement" (2.111–112). This could be read as a satirical reflection on the English strategy of not acknowledging the Troubles as an issue worthy of debate.

THE FOREIGN

However, the Pythons do not feel the need to be so delicate when they present overseas nations. References to foreignness in their shows employ excessive generalization and utterly banal stereotypes. When the comedians light on a foreign nation or culture, we see flagrant superficiality and a focus on the most hackneyed ideas, sharply exaggerated, that British people hold about the given country. Stereotypical portrayals of the foreign in Monty Python tell us more about the British who created those images than about the foreign cultures depicted. [1]

The presentation of the foreign begins with the very first episode of Monty Python's Flying Circus, where we encounter the sketch "Italian class." In typically nonsensical fashion, students participating in an Italian language class in some British school are . . . native Italians. It is not enough for them to indicate their place of residence—"Napoli" or "Milano"—they have to look Italian. An archetypal "Italian appearance" is rendered by clothing (dark pinstripe suits, dark shirts combined with white ties), thin moustaches, and very loud bickering. Adding to this excess, in the middle of their argument, one "student" stands up with a guitar and plays a popular Italian tune. Being Italian could not be more obvious.

Another Italian stereotype in the shows is based on the character of Luigi Vercotti, who reappears in the Flying Circus several times, always played by Michael Palin. Vercotti is first seen in the sketch "Army protection racket" (episode 8), where, together with his brother, he pays a "friendly" visit to a British colonel to offer him paid protection for his troops and military equipment. This stereotypical image of two Mafiosi is obviously distorted by the improbability of the context. The Vercotti brothers honor a media image of themselves with their mafia manners and garb—insinuating, threatening, sharply dressed, their eyes hidden behind dark glasses. One of them smokes, the other chews a toothpick, both of them straight out of some cheesy gangster film. The next time Luigi Vercotti appears on

the show (episode 10), he is the “manager” of Ron Obvious, the first man to attempt to jump across the English Channel (and getting no farther than five feet from the English coast). Vercotti, with familiar clothing and a familiar air, acts as Ron’s manager in a number of impossible stunts (like eating Chichester Cathedral or tunneling to Java), his main objective being to find sponsors for such events. After several feats Ron is covered with bandages and plaster, while Vercotti’s wallet has most probably grown thicker.

Another notable appearance of Italian culture in the Flying Circus occurs in the sketch “Fraud film squad” (episode 29), which uses a “film-within-the-film” framework. On a movie set, we witness a scene directed by Luchino Visconti, who has a strange predilection: in his English pronunciation he substitutes every “l” sound for an “r” sound, and vice versa. Soon he is discovered to be a fraud, a Japanese impersonator, Yakamoto, betrayed mainly by his accent. Clearly, the mannerism of speech used here is a well-known failing of the Japanese when speaking English. In fact, other mentions of Japanese culture in Monty Python are rare, not going beyond the obvious stereotypes of a samurai and a kamikaze pilot. The pronunciation problem is shared by the Chinese, whom the Pythons lampoon quite frequently too (e.g., in episode thirty-four, “The cycling tour”).

A stereotypical image of a foreign nation based on linguistic peculiarity also works for the sketch “Dirty Hungarian phrasebook” (episode 25), in which a fraudulent British publisher produces a book that plays a cruel hoax on its Hungarian users. In the book “the Hungarian phrase meaning ‘Can you direct me to the station?’ is translated in by the English phrase ‘Please fondle my bum’” (2.18). A Hungarian tourist using the phrasebook unwittingly addresses an English tobacconist with the line, “If I said you had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me? I am no longer infected” (2.17). There is no doubt that the users of the Hungarian language have been chosen for this joke because of that language’s total lack of correspondence to English: it seems quite plausible that a Finno-Ugric speaker would not suspect that he is being duped

a Finno-Ugric speaker would not suspect that he is being duped by Indo-European speakers. This accords with the simplest British stereotype of the Hungarians: they are the people who speak this unimaginably bizarre language, just as Far-East Asians are the people who cannot tell “r” from “l.”

The eastern people portrayed most frequently in Monty Python are definitely the Chinese, which obviously relates to the growing influence of China in world politics in the late 1960s and the ensuing increase in the presence of Chinese topics in the British media. The Flying Circus employs well-established British stereotypes of the Asian nation based on racial features; besides the aforementioned problems with English pronunciation, they include speaking in unnaturally high-pitched, squeaky voices. An example of this is a Chinaman in a sketch “School prize-giving” (episode 19), who tries to impersonate the bishop of Anglia while announcing the winners of a school contest. His camouflage is rather conspicuous, as he is wearing a Mao jacket and cap, and he holds up a little red book while he squeaks out the results: “Velly solly for hold-up . . . no ploblem now . . . me are Bishop of East Anglia, . . . Eyes down for first plize . . . [it] goes to . . . People’s Republic of China!” (1.250). Understandably, the position of Mao Zedong in Pythonian stereotypes about China is preeminent. When the Chinese take over the British Consulate in Smolensk (“The cycling tour,” episode 34), they hang a portrait of Mao on the wall, alongside a portrait of Elizabeth II. Mao himself appears in one of Terry Gilliam’s animations, surrounded by countless swarming little yellow men supposed to represent the Chinese communist conspiracy ready to conquer the world (“How not to be seen,” episode 24). This clearly satirizes a common Western phobia engendered by the Chinese demographic explosion in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Flying Circus lampoons a British preoccupation with the communist threat, which was a topic frequently presented by the Western media after the Cuban missile crisis. In the episode “All England summarize Proust” (episode 31) a Gilliam cartoon has fun with a similar conspiracy, but this one based on Soviet communists: a group of Russian leaders, among whom we can

recognize Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev, hide under a bed, then crawl around the city to assault passers-by, for instance, piercing a lady with a Soviet flag. The animation is preceded by a sketch in which the hostess of the program "Party Hints," who in the previous show advised viewers how "to make a small plate of goulash go round twenty-six people," now suggests a solution in case "there is an armed communist uprising near your home when you're having a party." Apparently, the best response is "to get some cloth and some bits of old paper, put it down on the floor and shoot everybody," unless you are having an outdoor barbecue, because "then the thing to do is to set fire to all houses in the street. This will stir up anti-communist hatred and your neighbours will be right with you as you organize counter-revolutionary terror" (2.113). An alternative remedy for the Red Menace is recommended in yet another Gilliam cartoon ("How not to be seen," episode 24), where Uncle Sam effectively cures "communist decay" with a miracle toothpaste.

The lampooning of the Red Scare obsession in Monty Python's Flying Circus had a curious effect on the fate of the show in Eastern Bloc countries. Piercing innocent people with a Soviet flag or shooting participants in a communist uprising during a barbecue party might seem utterly nonsensical and harmless parodies, but it was far too subversive for communist censorship. Poles had to wait until the early 1990s before they were allowed to watch the full Flying Circus series on television. Earlier, censors accepted only politically "innocent" sketches, like "The Ministry of Silly Walks" or "Scott of the Antarctic," so the only available Monty Python material on Polish television was the special Montreux compilation.[2] Indeed, the Red Menace lurks everywhere in the Python shows and can strike when least expected: even an ostensibly "safe" sketch "Bicycle repairman" (episode 3), based on an absurd reversal of the Superman image, ends in a "subversive" way, when the voiceover commentary suddenly remarks: "Yes! Whenever bicycles are broken, or menaced by International Communism, Bicycle Repair Man is ready!" We cut to the commentator, who

grows pathologically enraged: “Ready to smash the communists, wipe them up, and shove them off the face of the earth . . . Mash that dirty red scum, kick ‘em in the teeth where it hurts. Kill! Kill! Kill! The filthy bastard commies, I hate ’em! I hate ’em! Aaargh!” (1.35). Here, John Cleese obviously mocks a British individual crazed by the Red Scare, but the scene was enough to earn the program a ban in Poland. Similarly, the Eastern Bloc censors would not accept the way communist ideologists are portrayed in a sketch “World Forum” (episode 25), where the host of a quiz show invites to the studio Lenin, Marx, Mao Zedong, and Che Guevara to ask them questions about the Eurovision Song Contest and British football results. In the final round, Marx stands a chance of winning a beautiful lounge suite, but he does not know that Wolverhampton Wanderers beat Leicester 3–1 in the 1949 English Cup final. Juxtaposing the luminaries of the class struggle with a “bourgeois” materialist show was asking too much of the censors’ sense of humor. To make matters worse, later in the show a camera unexpectedly catches Marx and Che Guevara making out in bed; suggesting a homoerotic bond between two leaders of the Revolution, despite the obvious anachronism, was also sacrilegious. The episode that most richly abounds in communist references is “The cycling tour” (episode 34), in which a disturbed Englishman believes that he is Leon Trotsky and goes on a journey to Moscow. The direct mention of Trotsky and of Stalin’s agents hunting him is far too “subversive,” but the episode also contains other risky innuendos, such as a cabaret song announced as “an old Lenin number,” or a failed firing squad execution in which a group of inept Soviet soldiers miss the target.

Communist censors had nothing against sketches reflecting stereotypical British images of many other nations, including, for instance, Australians. The Flying Circus portrays Aussies in the sketch “Bruces” (episode 22), which concerns the Philosophy Department of the University of Woolamaloo. To avoid unnecessary confusion, every member of the department assumes the name Bruce. Another peculiarity of this faculty is

that four out of six of its admission rules are “no pooftahs” (1.296). Larsen suggests that “they are . . . either homophobic (by checking sexuality credentials) or latently homosexual (for the same reason)” (Shakespeare 199). The stereotypical homogeneity of these particular Australians lies not only in their names, but also in an exaggerated accent and dress code: all Bruces wear standard Australian outback clothing—typical khaki jackets, shorts, wide-brimmed hats, and heavy boots—and they sit in wicker chairs drinking beer. A development of this image is “a man from Sydney,” appearing in a special program produced in 1972 for German television, Monty Python’s Fliegender Zirkus. This character wears a similar outfit, but also boasts a rather unsophisticated sodomite view of the world: “I know as much about Dürer as I know about a kangaroo’s rectum. Well, a kangaroo’s bum is a pretty tight little number compared to other marsupials’ bums.”

Stereotypical images of the Spanish and Latin Americans are not so crude, focusing more on clichéd external appearance. The sketch “Llamas” (episode 9) introduces a nonsensical lecture on the llama, delivered in Spanish by John Cleese, who is accompanied by two other Pythons, a flamenco guitar player and a dancer. Their costumes are commonplace: a black Spanish hat, a black suit, a white ruffle shirt and a black string tie. They sport artificial grins and long thin moustaches. In the sketch “Strangers in the night” (episode 10), we glimpse a “Mexican rhythm combo”: the scene is shot in twilight, but the musicians are distinctly recognizable by—what else?—their colorful sombreros. In the general commotion of the scene, the only recognizable words heard are desperately predictable clichés: “Muchas gracias” and “Acapulco.” Occasionally, the Pythons lampoon one more aspect of Latin American culture, the regime of military juntas; for instance, in the sketch “Puss in Boots” (episode 28) we are taken to a Venezuelan police department and see its customary personages in their military coats, with pistols and sunglasses.

We find another stereotypical image of the foreign as military in the sketch “Mr. Hilter/The Minehead by-election”

(episode 12), which portrays a group of inept and clumsy Nazis attempting to win popularity in 1970s British society. The skit uses Britons' enduring association of Germany with the Third Reich. This association was pointedly satirized a few years later by John Cleese in the Fawlty Towers episode "The Germans," Basil Fawlty finding it utterly impossible not to "mention the war" before German guests in his hotel. The Nazis also appear in the famous sketch "The funniest joke in the world" (episode 1), where the Pythons have fun with what British people often believe is the Germans' lack of humor.[3] When Germans appear in the Flying Circus as something other than Nazis, they have to be clearly distinguished, which is most easily accomplished by clothing. In the already-mentioned "Italian class" (episode 1), a German student, Helmut, is dressed in a traditional Südtirol costume, and is looking for a German class. And when Michael Palin sings a German version of "The lumberjack song" in Fliegender Zirkus, he is dressed not in the original Canadian mountaineer's outfit, but Bavarian leather breeches. The last British stereotype concerning the Germans picked on by Monty Python is the common perception of their elongated compound words and names, hyperbolized in a sketch about a composer whose name is so long history will not be able to remember it (episode 6):

> Johann Gambolputty de von Ausfern-schplenden-schlitter-crass-cren-bon-fried-digger-dingle-dangle-dongle-dungle-von-knacker-thrasher-apple-banger-horowitz-ticolensic-grander-knotty-spelltinkle-grandlich-grumblemeyer-spelterwasser-kurstlich-himbleeisen-bahnwagen-gutenabend-bitte-ein-nürnburger-bratwürstel-gespurten-mitz-weimache-luber-hundsfut-gumeraber-schönendanker-kalbsfleisch-mittler-aucher von Hautkopft of Ulm. (1.67)

The French, of course, come in for classic Monty Python treatment too. In the sketch "French lecture on sheep-aircraft" (episode 2), two clichéd mock "Frenchmen" demonstrate a diagram of a sheep adapted for flying. John Cleese and Michael

Palin lampoon the British image of the French language in a blatantly exaggerated manner; they speak at quickfire speed, and overemphasize the peculiarities of French phonology to the point of incomprehensibility, producing nonsensical phrases. Their French employs a basic vocabulary (“d’accord,” “n’est-ce pas”), words that have similar English counterparts (“c’est formidable,” “les bagages”), and English words substituted for French (“les wheels”) (1.16). Both men also adhere to a French stereotype of dress. An indispensable French outfit in the Flying Circus consists of a striped Breton sailor shirt, a classic black beret, and a ubiquitous thin moustache. This “French look” crops up again and again, for instance, when in “Mrs. Premise and Mrs. Conclusion visit Jean-Paul Sartre” (episode 27) two Pepperpots[4] take a trip to Paris to see the existentialist philosopher. They come across a couple of men looking perfectly “French,” one of them even playing the accordion. Before ringing the bell of Sartre’s flat, the women take a while to read the names of his neighbors. Apart from some absurdly out-of-place figures, like the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, or Indira Gandhi, they see Yves Montand, Jacques Cousteau, Jean Genet, and Marcel Marceau. This may fairly represent a list of French “celebrities” in the British mind at that time.

But this sketch—showing that the Pepperpots are chums of Sartre’s wife, Betty-Muriel, and of the man himself—uses a reversed technique: the Pythons actually deconstructing stereotypes. The nonsensicality of humor lies here not strictly in the fact that two simple British housewives are in close relation with Sartre, but that they know him at all, since the French philosopher does not belong to the “celebrity” category exemplified by the names of his neighbors. A similar joke technique is used in the episode “Sex and Violence” (episode 2), when several Pepperpot housewives, interviewed in a supermarket by a BBC crew, declare:

> FIRST PEPPERPOT: Oh yes, we get a lot of French people round here.
> SECOND PEPPERPOT: Ooh, yes. . . .
> INTERVIEWER: And how do you get on with these French

INTERVIEWER: And how do you get on with these French people? . . .
FIRST PEPPERPOT: Oh yes I like them. I mean, they think well don't they? I mean, be fair—Pascal.
SECOND PEPPERPOT: Blaise Pascal.
THIRD PEPPERPOT: Jean-Paul Sartre.
FIRST PEPPERPOT: Yes, Voltaire.
SECOND PEPPERPOT: Ooh!—René Descartes. (1.16–17)

Another noteworthy appearance of French culture in Monty Python's Flying Circus is allusion to La Nouvelle Vague cinema, an artistic phenomenon widely discussed in the 1960s in Britain. Several episodes of the show make more or less veiled references to such New Wave directors as Jean-Luc Goddard, Alain Resnais, or François Truffaut. Perhaps the most conspicuous example is "French subtitled film" (episode 23), a parody of the New Wave style and technique: it is shot with a hand-held camera, edited in a typically elliptical fashion, uses minimal, trivialized, dialogue, and is described by a critic as "symboliz[ing] the breakdown in communication in our modern society" (1.309). Marcia Landy notes that "the sketch mimes the cryptic and disjunctive style of New Wave cinema and the tendency of reviewers to uncritically elevate this cinematic form and cinema, generally through pompous and inflated interpretation" (85). The "revolutionary" theme of the film, entitled Le Fromage Grand, with its clips from war documentaries interspersed with grotesque mock-documentary black and white shots, culminating in an exploding cabbage, might be an allusion to the topicality of La Nouvelle Vague, and also to French riots in May 1968.

CONCLUSION

In her book on Monty Python Landy emphasizes that "the Flying Circus portrayed, dissected, and destabilized conventions, formulas, and clichés in unprecedented fashion" (31). The inversion of the stereotype of a Frenchman employed in the sketch "Mrs. Premise and Mrs. Conclusion Visit Jean-Paul Sartre"

demonstrates that the Pythons were utterly conscious of the way stereotypes shape social perception of foreign nations. Accordingly, they were quite self-conscious in their presentation of the everyday, unoriginal ways the British see foreigners. As Homi Bhabha asserts, “the stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification, because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation” (107, emphasis mine). He further claims that “the stereotype requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes” (110). The gallery of national stereotypes presented in Monty Python’s Flying Circus constitutes a chain in which certain images are anchored. Blatantly obvious and exaggerated stereotypes of the foreign, represented as pastiche in the shows, enable the Pythons to re-create their most important stereotype, an archetypal self-stereotype of the British. It is Bhabha’s contention that the signification of the stereotype is contingent on the continuity of the chain. The signifying difference is clearly demonstrated in the sketch on the Anglo-French silly walk (part of “The Ministry of Silly Walks,” episode 14), which visually juxtaposes two profiles of one person, the first in orthodox French clothing (as described above), the second in archetypal English dress, that of a bowler-hatted gentleman so familiar to Flying Circus watchers.

Freud believed that Jews are unequalled experts at coining Jewish jokes. In the same way, the Pythons, being British, effectively concentrate on humorous stereotypes of Britishness, and the Flying Circus programs proliferate with them. But the Pythons also have, as this chapter has shown, a few laughs at foreigners. In his work on The Joke, Freud maintains that “As well as legitimately feeling that we belong to one people, we also permit ourselves to disregard most of these restraints in our attitude towards an alien people” (97). Since open hostility remains blocked and censored, be it by law, or by savoir-vivre, it is “by making our enemy small, mean, contemptible, comical, [that] we take a roundabout route to getting for ourselves the enjoyment of vanquishing him” (98). Obviously, when the

Pythons portray the Germans in Nazi uniforms, the Italians as Mafia members, and the Chinese as little yellow people mispronouncing English consonants, they do not suggest that the British are a xenophobic society. But despite their proverbial reticence, they have to allow themselves a bit of childish laughter, the deepest pleasure that only a good joke allows. Because “the joke reveals [the] original nature [of the thought] in its opposition to an inhibiting and restrictive power—in this case critical judgement” (Freud 127). The double edge of the Pythonesque irony in this case is that we laugh not at the foreigners, but at the British stereotypes of them, ergo, looking at foreigners, we laugh at the Brits.

NOTES

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1. This chapter does not embrace two types of references to foreignness frequent in Monty Python. The first one is the portrayal of American culture, discussed separately in Kevin Kern’s chapter. In fact, the status of the allusions to American

culture in the Flying Circus is quite special, partly because of the obvious cultural correspondences between Britain and the USA, and partly because one of the group's members, Terry Gilliam, was himself American. The other exception is foreign references based in history, omitted here despite the fact that among Python trademarks we can find the Spanish Inquisition, Cardinal Richelieu, or the Vikings. The historical references, however, have little bearing on the contemporary stereotypical perception of any nation in Britain and are thus excluded from this analysis.

2. In 1971 the Pythons prepared a special Flying Circus program for the Golden Rose Montreux comedy festival. It used clips from the first two series of the show, sometimes reshot, compiled with some new material.

3. For a more detailed discussion of this sketch, "Mr. Hilter," and other German references in Monty Python, see Adam Sumera's chapter on Fliegender Zirkus.

4. Pepperpots are middle-aged disheveled nagging housewives reappearing in many Flying Circus episodes.

Chapter 8
Twentieth-Century Vole, Mr. Neutron, and Spam

Kevin F. Kern

Portrayals of American Culture in the Work of Monty Python

> Shut up, you American! You always talk, you Americans, you talk and you talk and you say, ‘Let me tell you something . . . ’ and ‘I just want to say this . . . ’ Well you’re dead now, so shut up!

So growls the Grim Reaper in The Meaning of Life, one of the final (and most pointed) references the Monty Python troupe ever made regarding Americans. Despite the fact that Monty Python focused its humor primarily on British institutions and culture, the group derived some of its humor from—and in part defined British identity in contrast with—international correlates of these phenomena. Stereotyping and exaggerating non-British cultures was a common theme throughout the run of the show, from the French sheep-airline designers in the first recorded episode to the Icelandic honey door-to-door salesman and the “Batsmen of the Kalahari” in the last one. The United States of America, as a cultural, economic, and military hegemon during the years when Monty Python was most active (1969–1983) was no exception to this tendency, and it drew periodic attention throughout the television and film work of the group—including the original BBC series, the two episodes of Die Fliegender Zirkus made for German television, and their theatrical releases, particularly The Meaning of Life. An analysis of these programs and films reveals that portrayals of American themes reflected three broad responses to American hegemony: 1) minor or passing references to specific individuals, events, or products of American culture, 2) American cultural tropes used to serve a general comedic purpose, and 3) satire aimed at American

targets, specifically U.S. economic power, the crassness or banality of aspects of American culture, or American violence and militarism.

The relative scale of American cultural intrusions into Monty Python's work must be put into some perspective. The show was intensely British in focus, and it paid by far its greatest attention to subjects characteristic to the United Kingdom. Individual sketches or episodes relatively rarely used American subjects as a primary theme. Nevertheless, American culture projected itself into the work of Monty Python with some frequency, illustrating a certain degree of American cultural hegemony in Great Britain at that time.

A quantitative analysis of the 45 episodes recorded for the BBC reveals that virtually all of them contained at least one American point of reference, with nearly 230 references in all (see Appendix). For the purposes of this analysis, a "reference" is any explicitly American person, event, cultural artifact, theme, or other allusion that the Monty Python troupe chose to mention in the published scripts of their shows, including both dialogue and stage directions, but not counting names of characters not mentioned onscreen or anything so fleeting that the average viewer would not be able to discern it. Although this works out to about five references per show, they were not distributed evenly. American references increase steadily over the course of the series, with only 18% coming in the first season (3.2 per episode), 28% in the second season (4.8 per episode), 35% in the third season (6.2 per episode), and 19% in the six episodes of season four (7.2 per episode). Part of the reason for this may be the fact that the BBC's "Variety Programmes" handbook explicitly discouraged making fun of Americans and adopting Americanisms in its television programs (Larsen 77). As the Python troupe increasingly flouted BBC conventions over time, perhaps this helps to explain why most of the group's use of American themes—and its most pointed direct satire of American culture and politics—happened in the later seasons. Other factors may have played an even larger role: Terry Jones has said that he does not remember ever having read the handbook, but suggests that (at least for

ever having read the handbook, but suggests that (at least for his work) some of the increase may have arisen from a greater political awareness that he acquired over the course of the series of the effect that the United States was having on British society (Jones, 5 March 2013). Whatever the reasons may have been, by type, these references disproportionately focused on entertainment, with more than 60% of all references pertaining to American television, film, or music. In contrast to the British content of the show, relatively few references—about 10%—came from the worlds of politics or sport. This indicates that American entertainment was the most pervasive of all American cultural imports, at least in terms of providing points of reference for the Pythons and their viewing audience.

To be sure, the Python troupe probably did not self-consciously choose many of their American references as such. Rather, the selection of these elements often merely reflected the ways in which American culture had intruded into British life. One need look no further for an example of this than Monty Python's signature tune, John Phillips Sousa's "Liberty Bell March." As a show with a limited budget, the group had to select a song from the public domain (Johnson 21–22). None of the Pythons had been familiar with it, but upon hearing it, all agreed that it was perfect for the show, Terry Jones explaining, "it's quite jolly . . . but also a bit pompous. It's ready to have the mickey taken out of it, to be defused" (qtd. in Lee), and Graham Chapman once stated simply that "it was delightfully inappropriate" (Chapman). In other words, the song's American origins did not influence the selection decision at all. Similarly, the use of Irving Berlin's "A Pretty Girl Is Like A Melody" to underscore scenes of beautiful women (episode 22) or a judging contest (episode 37), was not a self-conscious reference to American culture but rather an example of how an American cultural artifact had become part of the British cultural landscape.

Some of the clearest evidence of projections of American culture into the work of Monty Python comes from the American tropes that the troupe deliberately used, knowing that the viewing public would tacitly understand the reference. For

example, the show used the theme song to the American television show Dr. Kildare no fewer than four times in association with medically related sketches (episodes 13, 26, 32, 42). General references to Hollywood and its studio system was another frequently-appearing trope, generally used without overt explanation. Space and science fiction also appeared on occasion, usually with some American association. This is hardly surprising, as the show debuted the year Apollo 11 landed on the moon. However, the alleged “Buzz Aldrin” program of the BBC series (episode 17) and the use of a Buzz Aldrin character in the Red Riding Hood sketch of Die Fliegender Zirkus are only the most direct examples of this. An American affiliation with these themes was also evident more subtly elsewhere. For example, in the “Bicycle repairman” sketch (episode 3), the Supermen who populate the town all have American accents, unlike the distinctly British bicycle mechanic. And indeed, even though the science fiction sketch about blancmanges turning people into Scotsmen (episode 7) had no American characters and few references to Americans (apart from Billie Jean King being eaten in straight sets), the piece is introduced by John Cleese using a resonant American accent, reaffirming an American association with this idiom.

One of the most popular American themes the Pythons used in service of their comedic ends was that of the Wild West or American Westerns, especially as viewed through the lens of the American entertainment industry. Whether through references to “Red Indians,” gunfights, or western movies or television programs, they utilized this trope in more than a quarter of all their BBC episodes, as well as both Fliegender Zirkuses. In fact, one of their earliest American references came in the first recorded episode, when a cowboy dressed in black gives Arthur Pewtey a folksy pep talk outside his marriage counselor’s office**.** The Native-American theatergoer in episode six, the Morse Code version of Gunfight at the OK Corral and The Smoke-Signal Version of Gentlemen Prefer Blondes referred to in episode fifteen, the “Cheese Westerns” such as “Ilchester 73” and “The Cheese Who Shot Liberty Valance” mentioned in

episode thirty-three, and even the archaeological epic Flaming Star in episode twenty-one, all play on the theme of the American West or western films. The Pythons demonstrated the durability of this theme beyond a British context by using it in both episodes of the German Fliegender Zirkus. In the first one, the Silly Olympics event of “Throwing the Hammer at America” acts as a link when the hammer in question lands in the middle of a dirt street in front of an old western saloon. Albrecht Dürer emerges through the swinging doors, introduced by the narrator as a “Nürnberg cowpuncher and Deputy Sheriff of Dodge City.” In the second episode, a segment on wild west mouseboys wrangling and branding mice—accompanied by western TV music—leads into a piece about a prospector mining for chickens and the rich chicken mines of North Dakota.

Although most of the Pythons’ American references pertain to the entertainment industry or cultural tropes, some relate to other types of American influence. Evidence of American economic hegemony most frequently appears in the passing mention of American corporations or their products that had become points of reference in Great Britain. Pan-Am (episodes 17 and 27), TWA (episode 23), Time-Life (episode 31), Kodak Instamatics (episode 31), Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom Soup (which Mr. Smoke-Too-Much sarcastically describes as “the first item on the menu of international cuisine” in episode 31), and of course Spam (episodes 20 and 25) are among the eighteen references of this type that can be found throughout the original BBC run, although some other direct references to American economic power also appear. For example, a representative from the British Sherry Corporation tells the sherry-loving vicar in episode thirty-six that he is one of their best customers, adding “you and the United States.” Similarly, as a way to illustrate just how mind-bogglingly expensive an element for an electric kettle would be on the planet Algon (episode 35), a graph states the price terms of the entire gross national product of the United States from 1770 until 2000. But the most critical references the Pythons make to American economic hegemony appear in those parts of The Meaning of Life that pertain to the

Crimson Permanent Assurance Company. The villainous company that has taken over this formerly family-owned British enterprise is “The Very Big Corporation of America.” The main office of this company is the first target of Crimson’s piratical octogenarian accountants, who then go on to raid a very American-looking financial district. Later in the feature, The Very Big Corporation of America appears again, with an executive steering a business meeting to “the urgent realization of just how much there is still left to own.”

Some of the earlier-described examples of economic hegemony—in particular the references to Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom Soup and Spam—reflect yet another satirical target of the troupe: certain vulgar or mundane aspects of American culture. One example of this is their portrayal of American tourists, who to a greater or lesser extent fall into the stereotype of the “ugly American.” Although the brash Americans from Philadelphia to whom the Grim Reaper directs his venom in The Meaning of Life are perhaps the clearest example of this, they are not the only ones. The naïve and hapless American couple who visit a Bavarian restaurant in the first Fliegender Zirkus are perhaps more well-meaning and less abrasive than the standard “ugly American,” but they fit the stereotype in other ways. Dressed in a loud checked suit and speaking poor, heavily American-accented German, the husband tells the maître d’ that they want a “typischer Bayerische restaurant mit locale colore” and gamely endure abuse at the hands of the wait staff in their endeavor to have this “authentische” dining experience. Similarly, earlier in The Meaning of Life, an appreciative but shallow American couple has a meal in a Hawaiian/medieval dungeon-themed restaurant in the otherwise bland American Super Inn Motel. Again not very fashionably dressed—the husband wearing a checked suit with a loud tie—the couple attempt and spectacularly fail to have a thoughtful discussion about philosophy. They appear again in the final scene, which takes place in a heaven that seems to be a celestial Holiday Inn run by Americans. “I love it here, darling,” says the husband, as the couple moves on to a dinner

show featuring a production number that is a cross between a 1930s kitschy American musical and an extremely garish Las Vegas floor show, while a Tony Bennett-like singer croons “It’s Christmas In Heaven.”

The vulgarity of the entertainment in Meaning of Life heaven was only the last in a series of direct jabs at the American entertainment industry. Several references to American television appeared throughout the series, none more direct than “The Attila the Hun Show” (episode 20), a parody of the short-lived “Debbie Reynolds Show.” With opening credits and a theme song modeled on the original, the sketch satirizes the most banal aspects of this show and of American television situation comedies in general, with characters mugging hackneyed lines to the camera accompanied by obviously recorded laughter and applause.

The troupe even more frequently satirized crassness and vapidity in the American film industry. They often parodied aspects of big-screen epic films, either with self-important titles (including episode 14’s “New cooker sketch,” Life of Brian, and The Meaning of Life, all of which have grand, stone-chiseled lettering a la Ben Hur), or credits that played on the names of major American producers or studios. For example, it is under the auspices of the 20th Century Vole company that Irving Saltzberg pitches a dreadful idea for a big-budget film starring Rock Hudson and Doris Day to a group of terrified writers who splungingly fawn over his every bland idea (episode 6). The fictional company was also the alleged purveyor of clichéd trailers for such classics as The Semaphore Version of Wuthering Heights and Julius Caesar on an Aldis Lamp (episode 15). But it is the 20th Century Vole production of Scott of the Antarctic (episode 23) that provides the clearest critique in this area. The Pythons satirize most major excesses of the American film industry here, from the remaking of original European films, to the slick Hollywood producer (named Gerry Schlick), to the testosterone-laden box office star of limited talent who heads the cast (Kirk Vilb), to the beautiful but dim diva who plays a superfluous romantic interest (Vanilla Hoare), and especially to

the tendency of American filmmakers to change historical storylines to fit the dramatic narrative they think will make a better film. Not only does Vanilla Hoare mention that her previous roles had included “Miss St. John the Baptist” and “Mrs. Jesus Christ,” and not only does one of Scott’s men encounter a twenty-foot tall electric penguin with stinging green tentacles (an event that historians are almost certain never happened), but Scott himself also fights a lion in the script, leading to the entire storyline and film being changed to Scott of the Sahara.

The Scott of the Sahara sketch targets yet another kind of vulgarity in American entertainment: excessive violence. Whether it is the fight with the lion or the encounter with the giant electric penguin, Gerry Schlick makes sure that the climax to these scenes is “blood [spurting] psssssssssshhh in slow motion” (1.314). Furthermore, in introducing the piece, a film critic also mentions “John Wayne’s latest movie, ‘Buckets of Blood Pouring out of People’s Heads’” (1.310). Sudden and extreme violence also occurs at the end of the “Cheese shop” sketch (episode 33), in which Mr. Mousebender ultimately shoots Mr. Wensleydale through the head for wasting his time. Very British up to that point, Mr. Mousebender then dons a cowboy hat and rides off into the sunset, in the manner of an American western hero. We return to the same movie critic, this time introducing perhaps the most flamboyant example of satirized violence in the whole Python oeuvre, American director Sam Peckinpah’s treatment of Salad Days. Words cannot adequately express the absurdly extreme violence of this scene, in which a charming garden party turns over the course of less than forty-five seconds into an accidental bloodbath including traumatic head wounds, impalements on a tennis racket and a piano keyboard, amputated arms and hands, and a decapitation —all accompanied by fountains of blood pouring from wounds. In preparing for this scene, director Ian MacNaughton told the production design team that a huge amount of blood in this sequence “cannot be overdone” (Larsen 424). These images anticipated the lament of the hostess at the end of The Meaning of Life, who is disgusted that popular film has sunk to “people

doing things to each other with chainsaws during Tupperware parties, babysitters being stabbed with knitting needles by gay presidential candidates, vigilante groups strangling chickens, [and] armed bands of theatre critics exterminating mutant goats." Demonstrating how little this particular critique of American movies has changed, these pieces came before the advent of the American Nightmare on Elm Street or Saw movie franchises.

This last theme points to another satirical focus of the show, the perceptions of violence and militarism in American society. Some of these are inherent in the Western, gangster, or TV crime show themes the troupe uses in other contexts, but other examples are more pronounced. In an episode forty-three sketch that primarily satirizes the brutality of boxing, it becomes increasingly clear that the big public attraction of the New York boxer named "the Champ" is the fact that his head and other body parts keep coming off in his fights at Madison Square Garden, which are attended by such notables as Frank Sinatra and George Raft. "Must be losing blood at a rate of a pint a second now. It's everywhere," exults the radio announcer covering the fight. "Certainly those who paid one and a half million dollars for those ringside seats are really getting their money's worth. They're covered in it" (2.303). However, the bluntest reference to perceptions of violence in contemporary American society was a very brief segment in the mock travelogue "Away From It All" that accompanied the theatrical release of The Life of Brian. Although almost exclusively focused on European locations, the film briefly shifts to scenes from New York City over which the narrator rhetorically asks, "If you want a carriage ride, why not try New York—a buggy ride through sunny Central Park? Because you'd be shot, mugged, or raped before you were halfway across, that's why not."

Beyond the perception of violence in American society, the work of Monty Python also occasionally reflects an unease over the larger-scale violence represented by American militarism. Fleeting examples of this appear in several places throughout its television run, usually in pictures or stock footage of nuclear

bombs or the then-current Vietnam War. In a few instances, though, the Pythons directly satirize American military hegemony. For example, in the Little Red Riding Hood sketch of the first Fliegender Zirkus, Red Riding Hood gets to her grandmother's house only to discover that it has been taken over by NASA and is occupied by Buzz Aldrin, who plants the American flag in front. The wolf (a rather unassuming dachshund in ill-fitting wolf's clothing) is shot by security, and, according to the German narration, the "American Space Program carried on unmolested by wolves and other forest animals intent on damaging American prestige at a time when development of inter-space communication was of vital significance in the free world." Although the narrator then explains that "NASA agreed to limit the use of chemical propellants in unmanned launchings from Granny's House," these words are spoken as a massive explosion obliterates the humble cabin and the American flag in front of it. America's self-appointed status as protector of the free world is similarly satirized in the animated advertisement for "American Defence" in episode twenty-four. Parodying the contemporary rhetoric of the so-called "yellow menace" and American policy of intervening in countries threatened by communism, the commercial portrays an unsuspecting secretary drowning in a rising tide of small yellow people. Onto this sea of yellow people sails an American military vessel to the strains of "The Star-Spangled Banner," and Uncle Sam appears in the style of a television pitchman:

> Yes, once again American defence proves its effectiveness against international communism. Using this diagram of a tooth to represent any small country, we can see how international communism works by eroding away from the inside. . . . In dentistry, this is known as the Domino Theory. But with American defence the decay is stopped before it starts and that's why nine out of ten small countries choose American defence! (2.4)

This commercial thus ties the brashness of American

militarism to the brashness of its advertising industry.

No example of this disquiet over American militarism and political hegemony could be clearer, though, than the portrayal of these themes found in the Mr. Neutron episode of the fourth series (episode 44). The Pythons portray American militarism as an irrationally destructive force, symbolized by the American supreme commander being willing to annihilate anywhere in the world to protect it from Mr. Neutron, not unlike the American officer in Vietnam famously saying that “it became necessary to destroy the town to save it” (Arnett A1). This general revels in a similar projection of power in the following exchange with his subordinate Captain Carpenter, reflecting the sometimes-strident nature of American militarism:

> COMMANDER: Have we bombed anywhere? Have we shown ’em we got teeth ?
> CARPENTER: Oh yes, Sir. We’ve bombed a lot of places flat, Sir.
> COMMANDER: Good. Good. We don’t want anyone to think we’re chicken.
> CARPENTER: Oh no! They don’t think that, Sir. Everyone’s really scared of us, Sir.
> COMMANDER: Of us?
> CARPENTER: Yes, Sir.
> COMMANDER: (pleased) Of our power?
> CARPENTER: Oh yes, Sir! They’re really scared when they see those big planes come over.
> COMMANDER: Wow! I bet they are. I bet they are. I bet they’re really scared.
> CARPENTER: Oh they are, Sir.
> COMMANDER: Do we have any figures on how scared they are?
> CARPENTER: No . . . no figures, Sir. But they sure were scared. (2.315)

Britain’s subservience to American military hegemony draws satirical attention in this episode, too. Not only does the prime minister have a shrine to President Eisenhower at 10

prime minister have a shrine to President Eisenhower at 10 Downing Street, but Eisenhower's picture is the first thing he grabs to save when he thinks London might be bombed. In the end, the United States bombs every single place on earth, literally destroying the planet.

It would be easy to use an episode like "Mr. Neutron" to suggest that there was an anti-American subtext to Monty Python's work, but this interpretation does not bear up under close scrutiny. When taken in the context of Python's entire recorded work, the portrayals of American culture described here do not represent an inherent anti-Americanism or a fundamental British/American dichotomy. Rather, they are merely a natural extension of the Pythons' frequent—and often more cutting—satirical focus on vulgarity, banality, violence, and militarism in the United Kingdom to uniquely American targets. For example, while American tourists might have been a ripe subject for several sketches, the troupe certainly provided even harsher portrayals of British types of all classes, from the lower-class entry in the "Most Awful Family in Britain" competition (episode 45), to the ubiquitous middle-class "Pepperpot" characters, to the "Upperclass Twit of the Year" contest (episode 12). Similarly, although they parodied American movies and television shows, the group regularly bit the hand that fed it in its portrayals of other British television shows, and BBC program planners were a favorite villain. They might have occasionally poked fun at American violence, but who could have been more violent than Britain's own Doug and Dinsdale Piranha (episode 14)? And while they may have satirized the American military on occasion, it was Great Britain's military that drew the lion's share of their attention in this regard, from the self-defense instructor with a unnatural fear of fruit (episode 4), to the cannibalistic naval expedition to Lake Pahoe (episode 32), to the captain who wants his men to march "hup and down the square" in The Meaning of Life, to the humorless British major played frequently by Graham Chapman. On balance, then, the heart of these characterizations was an attention to crassness, banality, violence, or militarism in general, rather than to any particular national flavor of these

phenomena. Indeed, not long after the Grim Reaper makes his devastating characterization of Americans in The Meaning of Life, he turns on the British host, barking “Englishmen, you are all so fucking pompous, none of you have got any balls.”

This last point provides an important caveat to an analysis such as this. A close study of portrayals of American culture in the work of Monty Python reveals that the Python troupe made frequent use of American cultural elements in their work, focusing disproportionately on American entertainment products and tropes compared to other aspects of American society. It also provides important evidence of the degree to which elements of American culture pervaded British society of the time and how Britons received and perceived them, which in turn speaks to larger issues concerning the nature of cultural hegemony. However, it is perhaps an occupational hazard of academics to overanalyze whatever they study, and this is certainly true of cultural analyses like this. While one can easily discern cultural influences on—and specific satirical intent in—the work of Monty Python, it is also possible to overdo it and ascribe significance to things that perhaps do not warrant it. One must not lose sight of the fact that the primary driving impetus behind the series was no more complicated than its writers’ desire to be silly and make people laugh by any means necessary. Indeed, one thing that united the Python cast was the fact that they wanted to get away from overt satire and instead, as Terry Jones has said, “create something that was off-the-wall and was just stupid or silly” (Jones, 16 July 2010). Although their attitudes toward political and social situations would inevitably creep into their material, Jones insists, “It didn’t begin from those things. They just happened” (Jones, 16 July 2010). Thus, while one could quite easily and convincingly create an analysis constructing the Spam sketch as a shrewd cultural metaphor intended to reflect the unwelcome and pervasive intrusion of distasteful aspects of American culture into British society, the truth of the matter is that Terry Jones (who wrote the sketch) did not realize at the time that Spam was an American product (Jones, 18 October 2010). Sometimes it is appropriate and illuminating to use references and themes

it is appropriate and illuminating to use references and themes used by the Monty Python troupe to draw larger conclusions about the cultural milieu in which they worked, and there is a growing body of work that adeptly explores these issues. But, with apologies to Dr. Freud, “sometimes Spam is just Spam.”

APPENDIX: AMERICAN REFERENCES IN THE BBC’S MONTY PYTHON

CATEGORY		NUMBER OF REFERENCES
ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY (Television, Movies, Music)		**140**
SPECIFIC REFERENCES		101
TV Shows		10
Movies		44
	Actors	20
	Directors	3
	Movies	21
Plays/Musical		8
Music		39
	Musicians	16
	Songs	23
GENERAL ENTERTAINMENT TROPES		39
Western		14
Crime/Film Noir		6
General Hollywood		19
OTHER AMERICAN REFERENCES		**96**
ARTS AND LITERATURE		12

	Artists	2
	Literature	8
	Dance	2
POLITICAL		15
	Political Figures	11
	General Politics	4
MILITARY		5
HISTORICAL EVENTS		7
LOCATIONS		12
SPACE AND SCI-FI		6
ECONOMIC		21
	Companies and Products	18
	General Economics	3
SPORTS		8
OTHER		10
TOTAL REFERENCES (cross-listed items counted once)		**227**

Note: Totals of each category do not add up to total number as some single references fit into multiple categories, e.g., “Gunfight at OK Corral” as both an historical event and a Western Entertainment Trope.

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Chapter 9
Monty Python's Fliegender Zirkus

Adam Sumera

The Unique German Show

Monty Python's career started in October 1969 with the screening of the first episode on the BBC. By January 1970, thirteen episodes of series 1 had been shown. For the following series, viewers had to wait till mid-September 1970. In mid-1970 the Pythons could claim to be known only in Britain. Their debut on Canadian television did not take place until autumn 1970, when series 1 and a part of series 2 were shown on CBC (Bradburn). In the United States it was only when And Now for Something Completely Different, the film version of their sketches from series 1 and 2, was shown in cinemas in August 1972 that American viewers came into contact with Monty Python's humor.

In that context one must admire the courage of Alfred Biolek, the person responsible for entertainment shows at the German production company Bavaria Atelier, who sometime in the middle of 1970 came up with the idea of inviting the Pythons to Germany to write and perform a special show for a German television audience.

Bavaria's representative in London contacted the group, an invitation was made and accepted, and in autumn 1970 the Pythons came to Munich for a fortnight. They enjoyed the visit so much that they agreed to write a show. The script was naturally in English, but it was then translated into German, and it was in German that the Pythons performed the show.[1] This is especially to be underlined because—as Terry Jones says—none of them, perhaps John Cleese excepted, spoke a word of German (Wehn). They learned their roles by heart, repeating the German dialogue after the translator of the script, Thomas Woitkewitsch, parrot-fashion. Cleese and Michael Palin say their lines fairly clearly but the others' statements have occasionally

to be guessed at. This learning by heart was difficult; Palin recalls: “Every day . . . in the evening I would learn another verse in German and think I’d’ve got it and the next morning it would have gone. Every day it sort of disappeared. Finally on the fourth day . . . the whole thing sort of stuck and since then I remember the ‘Lumberjack’ song in German, so it’s my party piece really” (Wehn). In the same interview, made some forty years after the recording, Terry Jones could still recall another famous line, certainly a tongue-twister for an Englishman: “Ich kann mit einem Eierlöffel Fledermäuse töten” (“I can kill bats with an egg spoon,” a quotation from the “Stake Your Claim” skit, originally spoken by Palin) (Wehn).

An anonymous critic stated that “[d]espite extensive language coaching, Eric Idle, Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones and Graham Chapman were virtually incomprehensible” (“Monty Python’s Fliegender Zirkus!”), but this is going a little too far. The Pythons’ strong accents certainly give the show some additional charm. Still, the whole situation is exceptional, given the long-lasting tradition of Germans dubbing practically all foreign films and TV shows on the one hand, and the Pythons’ extra effort on the other. In the 2003 history of the group, The Pythons, by Bob McCabe, Terry Gilliam said that the most common reaction to their performance in German was “Why did you bother?” (qtd. in Ritchie and Harris 74).

The success of the first German episode, Monty Python’s Fliegender Zirkus: Blödeln für Deutschland (“Monty Python’s Flying Circus: Clowning around for Germany”), recorded in summer 1971 and broadcast on January 3, 1972, resulted in a second show, Monty Python’s Fliegender Zirkus: Blödeln auf die feine englische Art (“Monty Python’s Flying Circus: Clowning around in the distinguished English way”). However, this time the Pythons decided to play in English. When the show was ready it was dubbed by German actors (“Nach-und Hinweise” 154). The English version was subsequently broadcast by the BBC, being—as Woitkewitsch proudly observes—the first “German” entertainment show in Britain (Woitkewitsch 99). Further broadcasts of that episode on German television used

only the English-speaking version, with German subtitles (“Nach-und Hinweise” 154).

The second German show seems much closer to the original Monty Python productions for the BBC, with the exception of its being recorded on film. There are two main references to the culture of German-speaking countries: the short opening sketch devoted to William Tell and a longer sketch, presented in parts, showing a soccer match between German and Greek philosophers; the latter is supposed to take place at the Munich stadium in 1972, so it is quite topical, referring to the Olympic Games. In the sketch, the line-up of the Germans, playing 4–2–4, is as follows: Leibniz—Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Schelling—Beckenbauer, Jaspers— Schlegel, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Karl Marx as a substitute. In this eleven, as the commentator says, “Beckenbauer is of course a small surprise.”[2] In the remaining material, there are only a few German features, mostly in the form of intertitles or some German names on screen; also a page in German appears when an appropriate entry from a book on princes is shown in “The Tale of Happy Valley,” and in the “Euro Sex Maniacs” sketch one of the actors is Thomas Woitkewitsch (the German producer of the show) playing a fictional character named Thomas Woitkewitsch.

However, the first show is unique, not only in the language of the performance but also in its connection with German themes, and this chapter will focus on those aspects, paying special attention to sketches or their elements that are connected with Germany or the German language.

BEFORE MUNICH

Before we look more closely at Monty Python’s Fliegender Zirkus it is appropriate to present briefly the Pythons’ experience in dealing with subjects that might be expected from them by their new audience. In the Flying Circus episodes produced before their trip to Munich, i.e., in series 1 and 2,[3] there are only a few sketches connected with German-speaking countries.

“The funniest joke in the world” (episode 1) begins in Britain, but soon the joke that is so funny that it almost instantaneously kills any person who hears (or reads) and understands it, is then used for military purposes in World War II. After translation into German, each translator working on one word only (the one who saw two words of it having to spend several weeks in hospital), it is finally used in the Ardennes on July 8, 1944. Given the order (“Tell the . . . joke.” [1.12]), British soldiers recite some words that are meant to sound like German, and the enemy gets killed by laughter. As the voiceover describes it, “It was a fantastic success. Over sixty thousand times as powerful as Britain’s great pre-war joke [as Neville Chamberlain is shown, the Munich Agreement must be meant here] and one which Hitler just couldn’t match” (1.12). And here real footage is used; Adolf Hitler delivers a speech, there is a cut to a man in uniform saying something,[4] and Hitler continues; the captions accompanying those three shots read: “My dog’s got no nose”; “How does he smell?”; “Awful!” (1.12).[5]

The sketch continues with Palin as a British soldier taken prisoner by the Germans and interrogated by the Gestapo, who want him to reveal the killing joke. He tries to bypass their investigation by telling them some other joke instead: “How do you make a Nazi cross?” The interrogating officer (Cleese) pushes him, only to be told: “Tread on his corns,” to which Cleese reacts, “That’s not funny!” (1.13). When Palin finally gives in, faced by torture (in the form of a feather with which they intend to tickle him), he tells the lethal joke in a made-up language sounding like German, which can be seen as another sample of the Pythons’ ability to use various accents of English as well as other existing or nonexisting languages (the language is meant to stand for German as all the Germans in that scene die on hearing the joke).

In the same sketch, the Germans try to reciprocate by producing their own joke. One is proposed by a scientist in a white coat (Idle), and we are treated to another snippet of pseudo-German; the joke is not approved of and the scientist is shot. Finally, the V-bomb is created and broadcast on the radio

shot. Finally, the V-joke is created and broadcast on the radio: “There vere zwei peanuts walking down the strasse and one was a salted . . . peanut” (1.14) (“a salted” sounding exactly as “assaulted”). We are shown two British listeners sitting by their radio set, who betray not the slightest sign of amusement on their faces. Marcia Landy observes that this sketch “draws on a host of myths about the superiority and culturally sustaining nature of British humor” (91). The lack of reaction of the two Brits listening to the German joke could be taken as the Pythons’ silent comment on the German sense of humor.

In “Mr. Hilter/The Minehead by-election” (episode 12) we see Mr. Hilter (Cleese, with an obvious moustache) who, together with Ron Vibbentrop (Chapman) and Heinrich Bimmler (Palin), is planning a trip, looking at a map of Stalingrad; this is interrupted by a phone call from Mr. McGöring, who apparently has found a place where you can hire bombers by the hour. Later Hilter gives an election speech to the people of Minehead, using a mixture of strongly accented English and an imitation of German (including the Pythons’ favorite word Mittelschmerz, nonexistent in real German). The speech is supported by a specific PR campaign, including Chapman with an Iron Cross around his neck and riding a bicycle equipped with an old gramophone playing “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles.”[6] Similar references can be found in “Escape (from film)” (episode 18) where two officers in SS uniforms appear, and in the cartoon “Escape” (also episode 18) where we can see a German fighter, although this time, judging by the shape of the cross on the fuselage, he belongs to WWI (and might be the Red Baron).

A few famous figures from German-speaking countries are impersonated in the shows, but only Ludwig van Beethoven is given his own sketch (“Beethoven’s mynah bird” episode 21). Here, Beethoven (Cleese), repeating “Gott in Himmel,” has considerable trouble composing the very beginning of the Fifth Symphony. In the same sketch, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart[7] also appears but only as the father of Colin “Chopper” Mozart, “Ratcatcher to the Nobility and Ordinary People too” and the owner of the “Rodent Exterminating Boutique” (both father and

son are played by Palin). Colin comes to the house of Beethoven, which has been infested by rats; before entering the house we can see the list of its tenants which includes Mr. and Mrs. Immanuel Kant, Mr. Dickie Wagner, Mr. and Mrs. J.W. von Goethe and dog, and Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827); among a few other names there is also Frau Mitzi Handgepackaufbewahrung.[8] Mozart (this time Cleese) can also be seen in "It's Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart" in episode one but in this sketch he is only the anchorman of a show presenting famous deaths, and one could imagine any famous person in his place.

In "Johann Gambolputty" (episode 6), we hear about a fictitious German Baroque composer named Johann Gambolputty de von Ausfern-schplenden-schlitter-crass-cren-bon-fried-digger-dingle-dangle-dongle-dungle-von-knacker-thrasher-apple-banger-horowitz-ticolensic-grander-knotty-spelltinkle-grandlich-grumblemeyer-spelterwasser-kurstlich-himbleeisen-bahnwagen-gutenabend-bitte-ein-nürnburger-bratwürstel-gespurten-mitz-weimache-luber-hundsfut-gumeraber-schönendanker-kalbsfleisch-mittler-aucher von Hautkopft of Ulm. In this truly Baroque name, a few rather down-to-earth elements can be spotted, German words and phrases whose sound must have set the Pythons giggling.[9]

Summing up, the German references in sketches in series 1 and 2[10] of the Flying Circus, which mostly poke fun at the Nazis, could hardly be seen as offering a promising start for the shows to be written for the German public. And the made-up language, standing for German, might have been funny for the English, but it surely would not do for native Germans.

BLÖDELN FÜR DEUTSCHLAND

Preparing to write their first show for German viewers, it seems that Cleese, Chapman, Gilliam, Idle, Jones, and Palin concentrated on topical items for laughter. Two of them were fairly obvious. 1971 was the 500th anniversary of the birth of Albrecht Dürer, a great German painter, famous also for his excellent woodcuts. The other item was connected with the near

excellent woodcuts. The other item was connected with the near future: in 1972 the Olympic Games were to take place in Munich. The third item was a little more universal: Bavaria as a tourist attraction. All three could be seen as a source of pride for the Germans. Still, the Pythons reworked their material in their usual way. In characterizing their shows made for the BBC, Marcia Landy mentions that

> [t]he Pythons' comedy has been linked to Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque, with its discontinuous, grotesque, and ambivalent style.[11] In particular, as delineated by Bakhtin, the comedy associated with the carnivalesque is linked to popular art. It is correlated with bodily functions that cannot or refuse to accept official constraints and identified with animality, irreverence in behavior and action, alterations in size and perspective, and forms of language that disrupt reason and meaning and challenge both common and good sense.[12] In effect, the carnival is a grotesque and disorderly vision of the world turned upside down, where everything is inverted and altered, but where nonsense reveals the tension between chaos and stability. (27)

Similar remarks could be formulated with regard to the German shows, although the Pythons took the trouble to connect their jokes with certain elements of German culture.

Taking the sketches thematically, let us first look at the order of sketches in the show. The DVD lists the following chapters:

1. An Introduction to Monty Python by Frau Newsreader
2. Portrait of Albrecht Dürer
3. The Merchant of Venice
4. A Word from a Frenchman
5. A Famous Berlin Specialist
6. The Lifetime of Albrecht Dürer
7. The Merchant of Venice Part 2
8. Flashers

9. The Hitchhiker
10. Little Red Riding Hood
11. Munich 1972
12. Stake Your Claim
13. The Lumberjack Song
14. Bavarian Restaurant Sketch
15. Credits

Many of the sketches are interconnected, some appear in several parts, and sometimes there is a smooth transition from one skit to another.

The opening of the show seems to have been aimed at introducing the Pythons to the German public by somebody very well-known to the audience. We see a TV announcer, played by Claudia Doren, then the main announcer of the WDR television station,[13] acting as if she were sitting in a TV studio and performing her usual duty of inviting the viewers to watch a show. As she is providing information about the Pythons, the wall forming the background suddenly collapses, and we get to see the shore of a lake. Two frogmen in full gear emerge from the water and come up to her. They grab her by the arms and drag her towards the lake while she continues to provide information on the Pythons: “Four of them are married and two of them have children. Their average age is 27. Two of them are over six foot . . .” Her words become difficult to hear as the distance grows. Finally they reach the lake and all three of them fall into the water.

The presence of the announcer provides a frame for the show, the program ending in a similar way: the frogmen drag the announcer out of the water and bring her towards us. All the way from the lake to her seat she keeps talking, continuing her initial story.

The drowning of the announcer opening the show is followed by a short scene with the caption, “Live from Athens,” in which we see a torch bearer and a car approaching. When it reaches the torch bearer, there is a cut to the Dürer sketch. The story of the torch bearer is continued later, in several parts. The first of them shows him with his arms and legs in plaster and his

first of them shows him with his arms and legs in plaster and his head bandaged (clearly a result of the car accident), supporting himself on a crutch, still carrying the torch. He passes a scaffold with workers on it, and manages to burn each of them with the torch. Then he stops by an old lady with an umbrella to ask her for directions. When she is telling him the way he inadvertently sets the umbrella on fire and goes away. The lady keeps on standing, taking no notice of the fire.

The torch bearer reappears some time later, after “The Flashers,” when he gives a piggyback ride to the unsuccessful hitchhiker, and again in “The Hitchhiker.” This time, the sequence starts with an egg frying in a skillet. Only after a while do we find out that it is the piggyback hitchhiker frying the egg over the Olympic fire of the torch. Then the torch bearer puts the hitchhiker down, receiving the fried egg as a proof of the latter’s gratefulness, and this is the last time we see him. The Olympic theme will be continued with sporting events.

Although the Germans must have been proud to have been given the right to organize the Olympic Games in 1972, what the Pythons offered was “something completely different.” Theirs was the Silly Olympics. The events presented in the show included competitions totally outside the usual routine. We see competitions in the following disciplines: the 100 meters for runners with no sense of direction (the runners disperse in all possible directions); the 5000 meters for the deaf (after two failed attempts when the runners did not hear the shot of the starting pistol we are told that the starter has also tried a machine gun, a mortar, and a cannon; finally he gives them the starting signal standing right in front of them but when they start they trample him underfoot); 2000 meters breaststroke for non-swimmers (they clumsily jump, or rather fall down into the swimming pool and drown); marathon for the incontinent (with constant changes of the one in the lead as they have to go to the toilet again and again); reverse tower jump (one jump is shown in slow motion, naturally being a jump from the tower played backwards); 3000 meters steeplechase for men who think they are chickens; 1500 meters for men with mothers; and, finally, throwing the hammer to America. The latter event

is closely connected with a later part of the Dürer skit but we have to return to its beginning to grasp its logic.

The Dürer sketch, like some other sketches, is shown in several fragments. First we see Dürer's famous self-portrait, then hear a quiet voiceover[14] accompanied by peaceful music, quite in the style of programs celebrating famous artists, which begins: "Albrecht Dürer, 1471–1530,[15] the Nuremberg painter who captivated Europe with his sharp eye, his mastery of line and texture as well as his car hire service—" Here a buzzer sounds and a male announcer (Cleese) apologizes for inaccuracies in the presentation of the painter. He stresses that Dürer NEVER ran a car hire service.

The presentation continues with a picture of Nuremberg, the town where Dürer was born, and some of his etchings and woodcuts;[16] the voiceover names several categories of artwork: portraits ("Portrait of Frederick the Wise," "Portrait of Ulrich Varnbüler"), landscapes (a fragment of "The Sea Monster" showing a town view and a fragment of "Saint Eustace" with another cityscape), details of nature ("Large Horse" and the surrealistic "Rhinoceros"), social themes ("Masquerade Dance with Torches" and "The Four Witches"—an additional joke as the former shows clothed men and women and the latter naked ladies), religious themes ("Madonna Crowned by Two Angels," "Last Supper" from "The Large Passion" series), and Dürer's love for the grotesque (surprisingly, a fragment of "The Martyrdom of Ten Thousand"). Although the classification of some items might seem a little strange, generally the presentation seems to be fairly routine until the moment when the voiceover states: "To find out more about Dürer the man, as opposed to Dürer the insect—" There is another buzz and a cut to Cleese who makes a warning gesture and says "Watch it!" The Dürer presentation continues with the opinion of a man from Sydney (Palin). The Australian, wearing an absurd hat decorated with hanging wine-bottle corks and holding a can of beer in his hand, states, "I know as much about Dürer as about a kangaroo's rectum" and then explains that he himself prefers the word "Arsch" (arse); when the buzzer

sounds he corrects himself to “Hintern” (bum), after another buzz he returns to “Arsch,” and then to “Hintern,” going on like this for quite a while. Thus the announcer has to apologize again, this time for the “inapposite style of that appraisal of Dürer.” The presentation is continued with a song sung by Anita Ekberg, or rather, as it soon turns out, by a man (Jones) ducking behind a large cut-out photograph of the actress. The song has the following lyrics:

> O Albrecht Dürer, Albrecht Dürer,
> du reitest durch die Lande,
> o Albrecht Dürer, Albrecht Dürer,
> du Held mit deiner Bande,
> gefürchtet von den Bösen,
> geliebt von allen Guhuhuhuten, Guhuhuhuten,
> du Dürer Albrecht, du.[17]
>
> O Albrecht Dürer, Albrecht Dürer,
> you ride through the lands,
> O Albrecht Dürer, Albrecht Dürer,
> you hero with your gang,
> feared by the bad,
> loved by all the goood, goood,
> you Dürer Albrecht, you.

Those words, equally far from reverence (“you Dürer Albrecht, you”) as from historic accuracy, are sung to the traditional tune of “Ich armes welsches Teufli,” a German Landsknecht song from the Middle Ages (Woitkewitsch 98).

The announcer apologizes once again, the Ekberg photograph is removed, the exposed singer, still bent in half, slowly goes off the stage, and the voiceover explains that this appreciation compiled to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Dürer’s birth has to be abandoned. Instead viewers are now offered the fourth showing of Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice performed by cows from Bad Ischl. The cows duly moo their lines, and German captions are provided as a translation. This in turn is followed by “A Word from a Frenchman.” The skit is based on an absurd idea but it should be mentioned here as it features Willy Brandt, the then West German chancellor, who,

together with other heads of state and important politicians (Georges Pompidou, Moshe Dayan, Richard Nixon, and Queen Elizabeth II), confirms the strange lavatory habits of a Frenchman, naturally in words provided by the Pythons and synchronized with existing footage. This sketch is exceptional in the show in that it uses other languages than German: English (Dayan, Nixon, the Queen, the eponymous Frenchman [sic!] played by Jones, and also a few other witnesses providing evidence, played by the Pythons, some of them speaking with a French accent) and French (Pompidou, Cleese). All of them declare that the Frenchman has not been to the toilet for five years.

"A Word from a Frenchman" goes over smoothly into "A Famous Berlin Specialist" in which the Berlin specialist (Chapman) describes the five happy years that the Frenchman from the previous sketch and himself have spent together. Again there is a smooth transition into another skit when the Berlin specialist, together with several other doctors, is driven into an enclosure. After a cut we can listen to a Bavarian farmer (Idle) who has been breeding doctors for ten years.

Then we return to Dürer. We see the pictures we saw in the previous attempt, but this time some animation has been added. An ear of Ulrich Varnbüler suddenly falls off; in the "Sea Monster" cityscape, a cannon is revealed and it shoots a huge bullet; when we pass on to the town view from "Saint Eustace" the bullet arrives and makes a hole in the picture; the "Large Horse" suddenly loses its hind half so that we can see its inside, resembling an orange cut into halves; the rhinoceros gets compressed as his back half moves into its forward half, and then the compressed creature hops away and up; when the "Masquerade Dance" appears, the rhino lands in the midst of the dancing courtiers, pushing one of the dancers out of the picture; in "The Four Witches," the courtier duly lands in the midst of naked women. Then we cut to the announcer (Cleese) who provides profuse apologies and after a longer speech invites viewers to return to the presentation. Unfortunately, what follows is in the same vein as before. This time fun is poked at Dürer's religious pictures. When something falls on the

poked at Dürer's religious pictures. When something falls on the head of the Madonna she throws away the apple she had been holding in her free hand; it lands in the picture of the Last Supper, hitting Christ on the head, making him fall to the ground and then totally disappear out of the picture. Cleese stops the presentation, we cut back to the doctor-breeding farmer only to be shown another glimpse of the Dürer presentation and immediately return to the farmer.

This is followed by The Merchant of Venice performed by doctors, with appropriate medical changes in the text (for example, "'Noble Antonio, how is't with you?' 'I'm suffering from inflammation of the alimentary tract'"). During the performance, Cleese appears at the side of the screen to apologize that the Dürer profile had to be abandoned. We go through the rest of the scene, then there is time for "Flashers," "The Hitchhiker," and "Little Red Riding Hood." This last sketch ends with the news bulletin that the Red Riding Hood (Cleese) has become an agent of the Bundesnachrichtendienst (Federal Intelligence Service) responsible for the United Arab Republic and has gone to live in Cairo. We see Red Riding Hood in an Arabian street approached by an Arab (Jones) offering her various items to buy —dirty postcards, dirty socks, dirty underpants, dirty wood engravings, dirty copper engravings, and, finally, pictures by Albrecht Dürer. Thus we return to the Dürer presentation. Now Dürer has changed: in his self-portrait he wears a keffiyeh (a traditional Arab headdress). His birthplace is now Wadi-El-Misbih. His works have also changed appropriately. We go through the same engravings as before but each of them has an Arabian element—Frederick the Wise wears a keffiyeh, and Varnbüler wears a fez and dark glasses; a pyramid has appeared in the cityscape; the horse has changed into a camel; even the rhino has a keffiyeh on its head.

As mentioned above, "Munich 1972" ends with the throwing-the-hammer-to-America competition. From the stadium we cut to some Wild West scene next to a saloon, and see the hammer land, shortly to be joined by a second, but nobody seems to pay any attention to it. After a while the saloon door opens and Albrecht Dürer walks out. He makes a

bow, and the voiceover runs: “Albrecht Dürer, 1471–1530, the Nuremberg cowpuncher and deputy sheriff of Dodge City—” As expected, the announcer interrupts. Instead, he offers us a panel game: Stake Your Claim. This is rather typical in its general absurdity, with a man (Palin) claiming that he has written all the works of William Shakespeare and Cleese calling his bluff by asking him about his date of birth, which turns out to be the only weak point in Palin’s theory as he could not have written the works over three hundred years before being born. A similar procedure is repeated with two more claimants.

The Dürer presentation also provides the ending. After the female announcer (Doren) has been fished out of the lake and put back on her seat by the frogmen, she ends her talk with the following words: “I hope you have enjoyed it [the show]. And now, please watch Albrecht Dürer.” And these words are the actual ending of the show.

The third sketch using more important German connotations did stick to national stereotypes. In “The Bavarian Restaurant,” an American couple come to a Bavarian restaurant and is received in the traditional Bavarian way. The maitre d’ (Cleese) tells them: “I’m sure you’d like everything to be authentic.” The service is excellent: apart from the maitre d’ there are two waiters (Idle and Palin) in Bavarian clothes who perform all their duties clapping their hands, dancing, and reciting appropriate phrases such as, “We’re taking your coats in Bavaria; Bavaria, where the mountains stick out of the ground.” After being given the menu, or, to be precise, after being ceremoniously hit on the head with the wooden board on which the menu has been written, the couple is eager to take the maitre d’s advice on their meal. He suggests soup à la clown (which turns out to mean that their faces will be thrust into their plates), and then, “for monsieur: prawns down the shirt and wine sauce with dill, for the lady the same, but up the skirt, with cream. For the main course I would suggest that monsieur is thrown out of the window with a few sauté potatoes.” Turning to the woman, he continues: “I think you should be strapped to the table and beaten about the head with a chicken. And to go with all this, an

ice cold bucket of pig's water." All this is duly performed in a very efficient and elegant way, with appropriate dancing and singing on the part of the waiters in Bavarian clothes.[18]

This sketch also proved that some expressions are difficult to translate. Michael Palin recalls that, as the two Bavarian waiters, Eric Idle and he were meant to say:

> "We are bringing you to the table, and sitting you here, in Bavaria, and scaring the shit out of you." Which sounded OK when we did it in English but when we actually did it, there was an air of appalled, shocked disgust from all the technicians around. We later realised it translated literally as "We're going to sit you down and cause you to involuntarily excrete on the chair" which is just not the same. (Chapman 212)

There are also other references to German culture to be found in other sketches. In "The Merchant of Venice," a theater critic (Idle) gives a longer speech praising the acting of the cows from Bad Ischl:

> . . . seldom do we find something so refreshingly original as this production by the cows of Bad Ischl. The Merchant of Venice has always been a difficult play for animals. I remember three years ago some chickens from Kaiserslautern trying it and failing miserably. But these cows have avoided the pitfalls that the chickens fell into. They haven't tried to dress up. They haven't tried to make it into an allegory about eggs. And they don't run away all the time. I can't wait to see these fine cows get to grips with Wagner at Bayreuth next week.

The cartoon "Flashers" uses several German posters but they serve only as a background for action that is universal in its meaning: a male flasher opens his coat in front of a woman in a poster; he is joined by a female flasher who opens her coat in front of a man in another poster. Then the two have a look at what each other has to offer and they fall in love. The cartoon

ends with both flashers happily flapping their coats and flying like birds.

In “The Hitchhiker,” the eponymous hitchhiker starts pitching a tent. We follow his efforts in close-ups. After he has finished, the camera moves back, and we can see that what he has erected is the Chinesischer Turm (Chinese Tower), a well-known twenty-five-meter-high wooden building resembling a pagoda, one of the well-known sights of Munich.

“The Little Red Riding Hood,” besides the already quoted reference to the Bundesnachrichtendienst, tells us that the girl’s parents sold their story to Der Spiegel magazine for 40,000 DM.

Although “The Lumberjack song” was based on a sketch already used in the BBC series (episode 9) here it was re-set in German reality, the lumberjack (Palin) now dressed in Lederhosen, and the chorus lines, originally sung by the Mounties, now performed by a choir of the Austrian border police.

RECEPTION

Blödeln für Deutschland was the first comedy show produced by an English team entirely for German and Austrian television.[19] The audience of the first German show was not too big; 9% of total potential viewers, a figure that was probably not helped by the fact that the other German channel, ZDF (at that time there were only two German television channels), ran an Alfred Hitchcock movie at the same time. An opinion poll of those who actually saw the show reveals a spectrum of reactions, 8% finding it excellent; 43%: good; 18%: satisfactory; 16%: poor; 15%: very bad (Woitkewitsch 99).

Henning Wehn’s program includes the observations of two Germans playing a major role in the current local showbusiness. Actor and stand-up artist Bastian Pastewka (born 1972) complains that as a result of playing in a non-native language “everything was so slow.” This is confirmed by Woitkewitsch, who stresses the lack of proper timing caused by the Pythons’ fight with a foreign tongue (99). On the other hand, actress and

stand-up artist Mirja Regensburg (born 1975) believes that the German Monty Python shows were “too fast-forward” for the German audience (Wehn), meaning probably their content, and not the delivery of lines.[20]

Wehn sums up the influence of the show on both the authors and the German audience as follows:

> For the Pythons, it broadened their horizons and made them think about the international appeal of their brilliant humor. And for the Germans? The idea of bringing foreign talent into the country was born with the Pythons’ arrival. Even if very few of my fellow countrymen [i.e., Germans] could understand the Pythons’ unique grasp of Deutsch, well, they were silly and that light relief made a refreshing change to German audiences in the 1970s. (Wehn)

Although it is difficult to fully confirm the proposition jokingly formulated by when—“Was it the beginning of the ECC —European Comedy Community?”[21] —the shows contributed to making the Pythons popular in Germany. They also can be viewed as a considered attempt to broaden the stereotypical picture of Germans in shows made by English comedians. Ritchie and Harris see them as “an entirely admirable attempt by the Pythons to reach out and praise certain aspects of German culture” (74).

Both shows made in Germany remain relatively little known in other countries. For example, Marcia Landy in Monty Python’s Flying Circus, published in the TV Milestones series, gives a detailed list of their BBC television shows and their films but does not list any of the German episodes. The only trace of that part of the Pythons’ output in the language of Goethe could be guessed at in the statement, “Not only did the Flying Circus become trendy, if not fashionable, in America, its popularity continued to grow in Germany” (26). Some sketches from the two shows were presented in the concert film Monty Python Live at the Hollywood Bowl (1982). “Colin ‘Bomber’ Harris vs. Colin ‘Bomber’ Harris” was reenacted, the “Silly Olympics” was shown

with the English dubbing, as was “International Philosophy,” the soccer match between German and Greek philosophers (no dubbing was necessary, as this show had been shot in English). The shows have been included in some DVD editions but they still remain a kind of collectors’ rarity.

Being difficult to obtain, they have a cult status among Monty Python fans. They can be studied as an attempt by Chapman, Cleese, Gilliam, Idle, Jones, and Palin to enlarge their artistic oeuvre. But first of all, Monty Python’s Fliegender Zirkus: Blödeln für Deutschland is a unique case of a group of artists performing a full-length program in a totally foreign language and basing much of the show on topical references to that foreign culture.

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1. The original script was translated into German and published by Haffmans Verlag in 1998 as Monty Python’s Fliegender Zirkus. However, it should be noted that whereas the German translation for the shooting of the show was made by Thomas Woitkewitsch, the book translation is by Heiko Arntz. For this reason there is no word-for-word equivalence between what one can see on screen and what one can read in the book.

2. Franz Beckenbauer, one of the best soccer players of that time, and perhaps of all time, plays himself in this sketch (Wehn) although it might be difficult to recognize him on the TV screen as there are no close-ups of him and his only task is to stand alone and look rather surprised at the philosophers absorbed in thought or discussing in pairs.

3. In the announcer’s introduction at the beginning of the first German show, Claudia Doren says that the Pythons have made so far twenty-five shows for the BBC. This might suggest that this show, although shot in summer 1971 (“Nach-und Hinweise” 152), was written before the British episode twenty-six (“Royal Episode 13 or: The Queen Will Be Watching,” recorded on

October 16, 1970) was produced (“Monty Python’s Flying Circus”).
4. Although Hitler’s words are difficult to decipher in their entirety, the other man quite clearly says: “Wir sind des Reiches junge Mannschaft!” (“We are a young team of the [Third] Reich”).
5. An interesting experience is offered by the DVD version with German subtitles. Although any viewer not knowing German might easily ignore the German words pronounced by Hitler and the other person featuring in the montage as his interlocutor, it seems to be hardly possible to listen to the text in your native language and read its “translation,” which has nothing to do with the original meaning of the speech, and find it funny.
6. Formally, it should be called the “Deutschlandlied,” but the national anthem of Germany is better recognized when one uses its initial words.
7. Naturally, an Austrian. References to all German-speaking countries are of importance for us here. Besides, Austrian television was a coproducer of Blödeln für Deutschland.
8. Certainly, there is one typing error: the name should read “Handgepäckaufbewahrung” as fictitious Mitzi’s surname is the German word for the baggage room.
9. “Bahnwagen” is “railroad carriage,” “Guten Abend” is “good evening,” “bitte ein Nürnburger Bratwürstle” means: “please [give me] a grilled sausage as made in Nuremberg,” “Kalbfleisch” (not: Kalbsfleisch) is “veal.” A few other words are distorted versions of German words and phrases, for example, “Schönedanker” comes from “danke schön,” i.e., “thank you very much.”
10. Following the reasons given in note three, episode twenty-six has not been included in the above analysis, but even if it had been, it would not have given us something completely different: it contains the “Exploding Version of ‘The Blue Danube’” but the sketch has no single line of dialogue.
11. Here, she refers to Ellen Bishop’s “Bakhtin, Carnival, and Comedy: The New Grotesque in Monty Python and the Holy Grail.” Film Criticism 15, no. 1 (1990): 49–64.

12. This is referred by her to Gilles Deleuze's The Logic of Sense, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 74–82.
13. WDR is short for Westdeutscher Rundfunk (West German Broadcasting), a German public broadcaster based in North Rhine-Westphalia, with its main office in Cologne. WDR contributes programs to ARD, the broadcasting consortium providing broadcasts of the first national television channel Das Erste in the Federal Republic of Germany.
14. This is read by a native German, Thomas Woitkewitsch. Most of the voiceover parts are played either by him (e.g., the narration in "The Little Red Riding Hood" [Woitkewitsch 97]) or by Alfred Biolek, the producer of the episode (e.g., the narration of "Munich 1972" [Bleeck 12]). In the animated sequence following "The Flashers" (starting with "There's a man with a trick camera") the voices belong to the Pythons, as this is done in the form of a dialogue.
15. In fact, Dürer died in 1528. Nobody seems to have noticed the Pythons' mistake when the show was recorded (it could hardly be taken as a joke). The wrong date has been kept in the book version but the editor added a correction note in the remarks section at the end of the book (152).
16. The titles are not given but I provide them here to identify the works.
17. The lyrics really sung in the show can be found in Woitkewitsch (98). The main text in Monty Python's Fliegender Zirkus book is a translation of the English original and does not fit the tune.
18. As Palin recalls, the sketch was recorded in a popular Munich restaurant. What really matters is that at the time of shooting the restaurant was open to the public, so in fact the Pythons were performing their crazy stunts in front of astonished patrons (Wehn).
19. This is stressed by Claudia Doren in the show and confirmed by the ÖRF, i.e., Österreichischer Rundfunk (Austrian Broadcasting, the Austrian national public service broadcaster), being mentioned as coproducer in the credits.

20. Monty Python's shows posed yet another problem for the German audience: how to pronounce the group's name? Woitkewitsch claims to have come across three interesting versions. Written down in German, they would be: "Monti Püttons" (in German, the letter y in vowel positions is usually pronounced as ü), "Monti Peißn," and, suggested by the WDR television in their press release, "Montipaisens" (94).
21. An allusion to the EEC—European Economic Community, created by the treaty of Rome (1957), which Britain did not join it until 1973.

Part IV
Pythonian Aesthetics and Beyond

Chapter 10
Eric Idle and the Counterculture

Richard Mills

Like all the Pythons, Eric Idle was a product of the 1960s and the counterculture. In The Making of A Counter Culture, Theodore Roszak attempts to identify the main trends in this movement. He suggests that

> It is something in the nature of a medieval crusade: a variegated procession constantly in flux, acquiring and losing members all along the route of the march. Often enough it finds its own identity in a nebulous symbol or song that seems to proclaim little more than "we are special . . . we are different . . . we are outward bound from the old corruptions of the world." (48)

This is the essence of the counterculture project and Idle celebrated and ridiculed it in equal measure. A paradoxical love of and simultaneous satirical distance from the counterculture is the central theme and preoccupation of his life's work.

Eric Idle was born in South Shields on March 29, 1943. After his father was killed in a car crash, he was sent to a semi-orphanage in the Midlands. Here he rebelled, joining CND, growing his hair long, and refusing to participate in the school's Combined Cadet Corps; this rebellious behavior was very typical of a 1960s outlook and was perfect preparation for the subversive role he was going to play in Monty Python. After school, he attended Pembroke College, Cambridge.

Pembroke had a reputation as the comedians' college; Peter Cook[1] was there when Idle arrived. Through the Footlights,[2] Idle met John Cleese and laid down the comic template for the rest of his career. Idle became president of the club, which was the big break he was looking for. In fact this opportunity was career defining: he was in the right place at the right time. As Python's author George Perry puts it:

> Eric Idle's presidency of the Footlights coincided with the

> new spirit of liberation that swept across Britain in the mid-sixties, spearheaded by the eruption of pop music, especially that of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, the mini-skirt, pop art and the curious phenomenon known as "swinging London." (116)

A failure to place his work in this historical and cultural period does his life and work a great disservice and leads to a partial understanding of his funniest and best material. From Do Not Adjust Your Set through Python and the Rutles, we have a body of work which opens a window on the 1960s roots of his comedy. The key influences on Eric Idle's work were the Beatles; the Dadaist artistic movement, which informed the child-like surrealism of the Python troupe; the 1960s satire boom (Peter Cook is the main influence here); surrealist art, which is a causal chain reaction from Salvador Dali through Spike Milligan and Goons; and the court jesters of the counterculture, the Bonzo Dog Do Dah Band. These artists inherit a Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which is a ridicule of prevailing power structures, an idea that was very appealing in the 1960s. Carnivalesque uses

> a rhetoric of laughter and ridicule but emptied of anything other than a hollow, ironic resistance to the all-persuasive nature of control. It epitomizes postmodernity's blank irony; parody without a final target. It constitutes a poor deal in the hegemonic bargaining. Yet, viewed optimistically, carnivalesque's resources are still there to be directed elsewhere. Here, as in other genres, it becomes apparent that style is ideologically and politically neutral. It's what you do with it that counts. (Conboy 170)

Given the 1960s' cultural ferment, it is unsurprising that Idle's work developed along countercultural lines. His monologues were both absurd and satirical. In this period, cultural mores were challenged; there was the rise of the Beatles and hippie culture; surrealist avant-garde art inspired mainstream entertainment and political opposition to the

Establishment. Among his influences, Idle mentions the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, the Beatles, and Peter Cook. All three exemplify surrealism or Dadaism in a popular or low-cultural framework. Each of the respective artists synthesized elements of low and high culture and made surrealism available to a mass audience, just like Idle in his solo and Python work. Idle acknowledges the significance of these sixties icons:

> Obviously, pop music had a huge influence on us at school. It provided us with a focus and an identity outside of our school and the context in which we were. We could identify with it and it was our music. As one got a bit older, one got into jazz music, and jazz was really hip and cool. Then, when you got to Cambridge, suddenly the Beatles came through in my first year and everything changed again. The whole of England was alerted; there was a big change in England brought about by the Beatles. Where everybody was wearing leather jackets, and it was cool and you'd discuss your favourite George solo and things like that. . . . Going down and buying the new Beatles album was something I did with Tim Brooke-Taylor. We were quite mature men but still excited to go and buy the new Beatles album, even when we'd left Cambridge and were working for the BBC. (Chapman et al. 122)

Eric Idle's countercultural concerns with Dadaism, satire, surrealism, and the carnivalesque are evident in his first television success, the children's program Do Not Adjust Your Set.[3] The program embodies the countercultural concerns of the 1960s with its surreal sketches and the inclusion of the clown princes of the counterculture, the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band. Watching this show forty-three years after it was first broadcast, it is obvious that Idle's subsequent career in Monty Python, Rutland Weekend TV, and the Rutles bears the hallmark of this cultural period.

It is especially his scenes with the Bonzos that set the tone and direction the rest of his work would take. The Bonzos were a

group of ex-Goldsmiths College art students (including Neil Innes, who was to work with Idle in Monty Python and the Rutles) who combined jazz, music hall, and psychedelic pop to create a surreal satire on the 1960s counterculture. They came to national attention as the house band on Do Not Adjust Your Set. As well as singing the closing song every week, they participated in sketches with future Pythons: Idle, Palin, and Jones.

The scenes that are most evocative of the 1960s are the sketches when Idle plays and sings with the Bonzos. In episode six and seven of series two, Idle plays the piano and sings “Love is a Cylindrical Piano” and “Captain Fantastic” with the band. Idle and the band are attired in Carnaby Street suits, and sport long mop-top Beatle haircuts and sideburns. The text and visual experience is stereotypically 1960s. However, Idle and the band are ironic and absurdist. They mock 1960s dancing and their performances are a satire on the 1967 pop climate.

The performances are throwaway and flimsy, but are significant for two reasons. Firstly, they set the template for Idle’s songs in Monty Python, Rutland Weekend Television, and the Rutles. Secondly, the surrealist costumes and lyrical non sequiturs are instances of Dadaist art, the artistic movement which has a significant influence on Idle and the Pythons. The Doo Dah in the Bonzo’s name is a direct and self-conscious reference to Dadaism. Arthur Marwick contends that the 1960s counterculture has its roots in “the Dada movement of the First World War” (316), which by the 1960s had bled into popular art. Marwick elaborates this theme by suggesting that the art and popular culture of the high sixties, 1964–1969, were notable for

> the intermixing of elite and popular art, already most obviously apparent in Pop Art and nouveau realisme . . . many of the great intellectuals of the time were fascinated by popular culture and the mass media. Classical musicians have long borrowed from folk music and, from at least the 1920s, from jazz: but, in fact, in the sixties the effort was much more concentrated and much more concerted;

furthermore, the movement was two-way. (316)

As well as surrealism/Dadaism, the 1960s satire boom provided Eric Idle with a sense of ironic detachment about the counterculture. There was always a critical distance, even about his most beloved icons (the Beatles satire, the Rutles, is perhaps the best example of this). And the Cook influence gave his work a satirical edge: “What Cook had that appealed to me was that savage contempt, which also John [Cleese] has a bit of, that nails somebody. You are so relieved that this hypocrite has been nailed to the wall” (Chapman et al. 102). Many popular countercultural icons, such as the Beatles, tended to lack such rancor in their work. In fact, during the hippie Summer of Love in 1967, the Fab Four had positioned themselves at the heart of utopian 1960s idealism, which lacked any of Cook’s or Cleese’s anger or satirical bite.

Idle’s combination of surrealism, satire, and an obsession with pop culture was carried on in Monty Python. Monty Python, which started on October 5, 1969, really defined the 1970s and became a huge cultural phenomenon of that decade. Nevertheless, its own style was defined by the 1960s. This is evident from the first series, which is populated by farmers discussing flying sheep, the Crunchy Frog chocolate bar, and “silly Frenchmen.” This brand of surrealism was by no means a staple of BBC light entertainment in the late 1960s. In fact the only precursors of such a form in a popular medium were Spike Milligan and his groundbreaking surrealistic Goon Show. In fact, the Monty Python phenomenon is difficult to understand without understanding its 1960s roots. Although Idle was skeptical about hippies, his type of verbal absurdity is influenced by a countercultural social milieu. All the Pythons wore their hair long and delighted in the absurd. Along with Idle’s whimsical monologues, his whimsical songs, such as “Eric the Half a Bee,” and his Beatles obsession, Gilliam’s surreal cartoons are also indisputable evidence that Pythons are sixties people. That decade is the aesthetic basis of their comedy. The peak years for the counterculture were 1965 to 1972—the years which

produced Python and the years in which the group was most active.

The audience's response to the early episodes clearly proves this. Idle describes the fans' reaction as amused bafflement: "I used to play football in Hyde Park every Sunday, and they'd go . . . 'That was bloody weird I like it though'" (Chapman et al. 229). The Pythons were popularizing Dadaism, making it palatable to a mass audience. In the first series, we can see that Idle's scripts and songs are synonymous with the counterculture and that this iconoclasm, surrealism, and skepticism towards religious and political monoliths was not yet part of the mainstream comedic diet.

Such attitudes permeated early Python work, and countercultural influence surrounding Monty Python contributed to their surrealism, a spontaneous Dadaist flow that was especially suited to television. The music writer Ian MacDonald name checks Python as harnessing surrealist art and placing it in a popular context: "Indeed television, with its in-built sensationalistic bias and bathetic discontinuities . . . has been more influential in advancing post-sixties revolution in the head than any other technological innovation" (30). This "bathetic discontinuity" is a feature of Idle's sketches and songs. Python's aesthetic is a mélange of disparate subconscious images (Terry Gilliam's cartoons) and the ridiculous (Idle's puns). "Bathetic discontinuity" and surrealism are also features of the 1960s psychedelic experience, a cornerstone of the countercultural edifice, and this psychedelic experience exerted an influence on Python.

The surrealistic or even the psychedelic was the basis of the Monty Python television series. One of the main characteristics of surrealism or psychedelia is the indeterminacy and randomness of language, that is, "chance elements being incorporated into works of art and there being uncertainty about the meaning or meanings of particular works" (Marwick 317). The roots of Python bear this definition out; even the early proposed titles of Monty Python's Flying Circus are an exercise in psychedelic silliness. Michael Palin's diary entry for Tuesday,

July 8, 1969, discusses the working title for the show: “Bunn Wackett Buzzard Stubble and Boot . . . , ‘Whither Canada?’, ‘Ow! It’s Colin Plint’, ‘A Horse, a Spoon and a Bucket’, ‘The Toad Elevating Moment’, ‘The Algy Banging Hour’ and ‘Owl Stretching Time’” (1). This love of surrealistic word play is the heart of Idle’s comedy. His Python sketches incorporate such whimsical approach to language.

In the first series of the Flying Circus, Idle’s appearance and humor is very similar to Do Not Adjust Your Set. His hair is the longest of the Pythons, he sings and plays the guitar, his sketches feature more sexual innuendo than his coperformers (most notably the “Nudge nudge” sketch in episode three). Perhaps, more important than the sexual content and his appearance is that his sketches employ more puns and absurd word play than the others. This elasticity with language is a feature of his work with and after Python.

Nevertheless, it is Idle’s explicit references to the counterculture in series one of the Flying Circus that provide a sense of coherence in his work. In episode thirteen, entitled “Intermission,” a sketch called “Operating theatre squatters” has Idle (in full hippie garb) emerging from Michael Palin’s stomach mid-operation to utter a series of hippie clichés. In series two, episode twenty-four, Idle is dressed as John Lennon, in a wig, wearing Lennon granny glasses and ridiculing the famous bed-in peace campaign with the phrase “I’m starting a war for peace.” A close scrutiny of all four Monty Python series reveals that any countercultural characters and most musical parodies star Eric Idle. In fact, by series four, he has installed his old colleague, Neil Innes from Do Not Adjust Your Set, as the “seventh” member of the Monty Python team.

Idle’s interest in the counterculture continued throughout the 1970s in his first solo show without the Pythons: Rutland Weekend Television. Rutland Weekend Television was written by Eric Idle and Neil Innes and broadcast on BBC2. It ran for two series between 1975 and 1976, and a Christmas special in 1975 starred George Harrison. The program highlighted Idle’s interest in pop music, with its surreal satires on the Beatles, and on the

top music program of the 1970s, The Old Grey Whistle Test. By far the most successful sketch was the Idle/Innes homage to the Beatles, featuring a band called the Rutles. The sketch has Idle as a psychiatrist treating patients who are “suffering from love.” After various attempts to cure patients of this disease, the spoof segues into Innes’s parody of the Beatles called “I Must Be in Love.”

Rutland Weekend Television was the moment in Idle’s career when he could indulge his countercultural interests to the fullest; and although much of his work in this series is a parody of sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll clichés, he is in love with the culture he is parodying. In fact the Innes/Idle collaboration, the Rutles, is a remarkably convincing spoof of the Beatles. The sketch proved such a success that it was repeated on the USA’s Saturday Night Live and attracted a huge cult following. Buoyed by this success, Idle and Innes (Idle writing the script and Innes the songs) created a television film in 1978 dedicated solely to the Rutles and called All You Need is Cash. The film is a satire of the Beatles, the Pre-Fab Four: Ron Nasty is played by Neil Innes and based on Lennon, Dirk McQuicly has Idle sending up Paul McCartney, Rikki Fataar plays the George Harrison character, and John Halsey is Ringo, Barry Wom.

The parody of 1967’s Summer of Love, the height of counterculture, is the point in the film where hackneyed sixties mythology is ridiculed most effectively. The Beatles’ dalliance with LSD is described as “tea drinking”: “Despite warnings that it would lead to stronger things, the Rutles enjoyed the pleasant effects of tea and it influenced their greatest work: Sgt Rutter” (The Rutles). The Summer of Love is characterized as an “Idyllic summer of flowers, bells and tea drinking” (The Rutles). This comic description of LSD as “tea” is a typically ridiculous and surreal Idle joke. In fact, George Harrison found this so funny that he referred to LSD as tea in many interviews over the years, most notably in 1995’s exhaustive chronology of the Beatles’ career: Anthology.

“All You Need is Love,” the hippie anthem of 1967, is ridiculed as the monotonous “Love Life,” with Idle, Innes, and others delivering a savage parody of the One World satellite

others delivering a savage parody of the One World satellite broadcast of that year. In fact, this whole section delights in the ridicule of hippie platitudes.

The Beatles' and the counterculture's interest in mysticism is also a target. Stig, the George Harrison character, falls under the spell of "Arthur Sultan: the Surrey Mystic," who encourages the Pre-Fab Four to spend a "weekend table-tapping in Bognor" (The Rutles). This is a reference to the Beatles' and especially George Harrison's devotion to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's brand of Transcendental Meditation, which was briefly in vogue for the love generation in 1967.

Academics who write pretentiously on the Beatles are ridiculed in the Rutles, too. The hippie lecturer, Stanley J. Krammerhead III (the embodiment of the counterculture), "is an occasional visiting lecturer of applied narcotics at the University of Please Yourself, California" (The Rutles). In a memorable monologue of academic wordiness, Idle hits academia and the counterculture with both barrels.

George Harrison also had a brief cameo in The Rutles, adding authenticity to the project, a project where Idle's love for the object of his satire is clear. In fact, the most convincing evidence for Idle's obsession with the Beatles and the counterculture are his words on his relationship with George Harrison: "I never knew a man like him. It was as if we fell in love. . . . We would stay up all night and talk for hours about our lives. . . . He was always full of spiritual comfort, counsel and advice" (Idle 221).

After The Rutles, Idle's song parodies and his ironic take on cultural monoliths became a distinctive feature of Monty Python's oeuvre, especially in 1978's Life of Brian, the Pythons' most controversial film. Idle's contribution in this satire of religion and fanaticism was to play his characteristic cheeky chappie character. The most memorable part of the film is the closing crucifixion scene, where Idle leads the Monty Python team though a sing-along of his "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life." In a sense, it is a culmination of his work with Python: a subversive, comic ridicule of orthodox religion. Again, this is a feature of the sixties counterculture that had resonated with

Idle: skepticism towards all organized religion.

Idle's antireligious material was typical of his closeness to radical hippiedom, more so than any of the other Pythons; this is shown by his dalliances in music with the Bonzo Dog Do Dah Band, his Python songs, his Beatles satire, the Rutles, his love of surrealist monologue and double entendres (the "Nudge nudge" sketch), his friendship with George Harrison and his liberal attitude to drugs and sex. His US tour diary is very revealing about his friendship with Harrison (one of the main icons of the counterculture), and, inadvertently, his attitude to life. He describes sharing a "jay" with Harrison:

> Terry Gilliam was with me in May 1975 when we attended the first screening of Monty Python and the Holy Grail at the old Directors guild building on Sunset. I think I knew George was supposed to be coming, and was slightly anxious and even unsure about meeting him, as I heard what a raving fan he was, but I was blown away when he appeared at the end in the darkened cinema, and hugged me and launched straight into the first of many intense conversations, which began as monologues and then, as I grew confident and emboldened to interrupt and share my thoughts, became long and deep conversations about everything in our universe: life, death, love, the nature of religion; hours of sharing and "catching up" as he called it, as if he too felt he'd known me before, and his apothegms and memories and rants enlivened my life for almost thirty years. (Idle 222)

On first impression, it was perhaps an unlikely friendship, Idle failing to share Harrison's spiritual concerns, and Idle's life and work anatomizing and satirizing the 1960s. Idle's media image seems to connote a more knowing, cynical, better-educated individual. However, as this passage testifies, they had much in common. Both are musical, both are from the north of England, they have each imbibed a 1960s surrealism and this whimsy is one of the main aesthetic features of their respective

work. His relationship with the rock community had a huge influence on his work. George Harrison, for instance, appeared in Rutland Weekend Television, The Rutles, and Life of Brian. Idle's work is predicated on the desire to be a rock musician, and much of his writing is couched in language and imagery taken from the music industry. His Rutland Weekend Television work parodied not only the Beatles and The Old Grey Whistle Test, but also the Who's Tommy. It is The Rutles where this parody found its full absurdist glory. It is an extreme example of his sixties obsession. He loved the Beatles, but the satirist in him also found it irresistible to attack their mythology.

The link between the Beatles and Monty Python is well chronicled. Writing in 1975, Michael Palin suggested that the Pythons wanted the Magical Mystery Tour as the supporting feature to Monty Python and the Holy Grail,

> It was suggested at a meeting last year that we should try and put out the Magical Mystery Tour as a supporting film to Holy Grail, there was unanimous agreement among the Python group. After several months of checking and cross-checking we finally heard last week that the four Beatles had been consulted and let the film go out. (203–4)

The Pythons and the Beatles sharing a cinematic double bill shows the proximity between both groups. It is revealing that the Beatles' most experimental and surrealistic film was considered as a bedfellow to The Holy Grail. In 1975, the Pythons were making a link with a 1960s iconic cultural text. In so doing, Cleese, Chapman, Gilliam, Jones, and especially Idle and Palin were making homage to their 1960s roots.

The closeness between the Pythons and the Beatles is an argument that becomes stronger with the passing of time. Speaking to Martin Scorsese, Eric Idle recounts how Harrison famously bankrolled the Life of Brian film to the tune of three million pounds. Idle humorously suggests: "He mortgaged his house to put up the money for this movie because he wanted to see it, which is the most anyone has paid for a cinema ticket"

(George Harrison).

Python and the Beatles shared a love of surreal subversion. Jim Yoakum, the US curator of the Graham Chapman Archives, writing about Chapman's role in Python, explains how both groups were stylistically similar:

> Monty Python (the troupe) has often been referred to as "the Beatles of comedy" and, in many ways, Graham held the same position as John Lennon within the Beatles. Not the unchallenged leadership (that belongs to John Cleese) but the same natural absurdity and irreverence that, while it often chafed and created unwelcome controversy, sparked the others to achieve greater heights. (qtd. in Chapman 27)

Yoakum's words are also applicable to Idle. Like the Beatles, he was "absurd," "irreverent" and "controversial." All three adjectives can be applied to the Beatles, the sixties counterculture, and Monty Python.

Another shared aspect of the hippie movement and Python is that both are predicated on an idealized and romanticized view of childhood and adolescence. Marwick describes youth as the chief characteristic of the 1960s counterculture,

> The rise to positions of unprecedented influence of young people, with youth subculture having a steadily increasing impact on the rest of society, dictating taste in fashion, music, and popular culture generally . . . such was the prestige of youth and the appeal of the youthful lifestyle that it became possible to be "youthful" at much more advanced ages than would ever have been thought proper previously. Youth, particularly at the teenage end, created a vast market of its own in the artefacts of popular culture. (17)

The Pythons were young, the Beatles were young, and both groups symbolized the culture of the sixties. Both groups also brought countercultural concerns into the British mainstream. In a sense, the roots of both groups was a youthful,

countercultural rebellion.

The 1960s hippie mantra was that childhood was the repository of a deep, spiritual insight. Likewise, the teenage and undergraduate experience was equally glorified in the years 1965 to 1972: the period when authority was radically questioned. This is why Python was so popular with young people: it resonated with hippies and young undergraduates. Idle was twenty-six when Python started, so it was a mindset he understood, whether ridiculing it or relishing its hippie iconoclasm. Jon Savage described this new sensibility as the "ultimate psychic match for the times: living in the now, pleasure seeking, product-hungry, embodying the new global society where social inclusion was to be granted through purchasing power" (465). It is a description which captures the character type of 1960s youth. It is also an accurate description of Idle and Harrison. The counterculture preached revolution, but they were, unlike the New Left in the 1960s, comfortable with individualism and entrepreneurialism. As Christopher Booker observes about the Beatles and Monty Python, "Above all, with the coming of this new age, a new spirit was unleashed —a new wind of essentially youthful hostility to every kind of established convention and tradition authority, a wind of moral freedom and rebellion" (33). Savage and Booker describe 1960s culture well and inadvertently get to the core of Harrison and Idle's personalities. Both are very much products of their times. Python and the Beatles are informed by a hippie culture: they are a symbol of a youth-obsessed decade. In an interview with the broadcaster Clive Anderson, Eric Idle concurs with this description of the 1960s and explains that it is the childhood and adolescent state that is the heart of their comedy:

> [Monty Python] addresses the post-adolescent state. It's anti-army, anti-authority, anti-school, anti-teachers, anti-church, anti-mothers, anti-fathers, anti-aunties . . . when you get to the post-adolescent stage and go to college that sort of age group really finds Monty Python . . . that's what they've got to in their development. ("Eric Idle Interview")

It is also a description of why the Beatles are so popular and a cogent summary of 1960s popular culture in general.

George Harrison contends that Python and the Beatles were the joint embodiment of the 1960s counterculture. “Python was the spirit of the Beatles kept alive after they [the Beatles] broke up” (Chapman et al. 390). In a throwaway one-liner, the American comedian Chevy Chase recognizes a symbiotic relationship between Python, the Beatles, and the counterculture. During an interview for the Life of Python documentary, Chase feigns ignorance when an interviewer enquires about Monty Python: “Monty Python? You mean the rock group?” (Life of Python).

Idle and the Pythons are cut from the same material as the rock bands of the 1960s. They are iconoclastic, surrealist, absurdist, and youthful. The Pythons, and especially Idle, are a product of two very distinctive cultural strands: the satire of the Beyond the Fringe team and the radical surrealism of the counterculture. The Beyond the Fringe team was the combined talents of Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett, and Jonathan Miller. Their seminal 1960s revue show was an absurdist satire on the 1960s. Idle has asserted that Cook had an impact on his writing and performing: “Cook was a huge influence . . . he’s just big time for me, extraordinarily funny” (Chapman et al. 102).

Python never completely severed their umbilical cord with the sixties. Perhaps Harrison was right, a suitable coda to the Beatles’ career would have been a Beatles and Python super group: “comedy as the new Rock and Roll.”

NOTES

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1. Peter Cook, 1937–1995. English satirist, writer, and comedian.
2. Footlights, Cambridge University Footlights Dramatic club, an amateur theatrical club formed in 1883. The club was a hotbed of comedy and satire in the 1960s.
3. Do Not Adjust Your Set was first broadcast on December 26, 1967, by Rediffusion London and then Thames Television, and was notable for giving Idle his first starring role on British Television.

Chapter 11
Kitsch Britannia in Monty Python's Flying Circus

Justyna Stępień

> The BBC would like to announce that the next scene is not considered suitable for family viewing. It contains scenes of violence, involving people's arms and legs getting chopped off. . . . There are also scenes of naked women with floppy breasts and also at one point you can see a pair of buttocks, and there's another bit where I'll swear you see everything. . . . Because of the unsuitability of the scene, the BBC will be replacing it with a scene from a repeat of "Gardening Club" for 1958. (Just the Words 2.82)

The "Apology for violence and nudity," presented in the form of a voiceover by Eric Idle, was a part of a sketch from episode twenty-nine of the Flying Circus. It was a satirical voice on the mechanisms of the hidden, and often subliminal, censorship employed by the BBC in the 1960s. This was a time when the British media and arts were liberated by the gradual aestheticization of everyday life and consumer production. Also, the increasing industrialization of the media provided the basis for the operation of new practices and institutional structures that resulted from the economic imperatives of a "culture of affluence."[1] Television fed itself on mass culture material regulated by a market that was a huge source of income in the years of the economic boom. However, in the face of commercialization and commoditization of culture, the BBC was under pressure to maintain its status quo. Thus the national television apparatus still largely controlled cultural production, often eliminating taboo topics but at the same time affirming the "bourgeois commodity-status" (Ridgman 155).

This ambivalent, often contradictory, function of the medium in the sixties became a major inspiration for the Pythons, who wanted to express their dissatisfaction with the

values and cultural productions propagated by the mass media in the sixties. The ambiguous practices of national television are parodied in the subsequent part of the sketch called “Ken Russell’s ‘Gardening Club,’” which presents an orgy scene with characters dressed up as people from the different epochs and social structures of the nation. To emphasize the seriousness of the scene and the source of inspiration for the presented material (as the captions suggest), the direction of this short program was ascribed to Ken Russell, the major British director cooperating with the BBC at that time. Here, the pathos of the initial voiceover is parodied in the second part of the sketch by the application of images borrowed from high-and low-brow culture. What is more, the explicit violence and nudity, presented also through the inversion of the gardening program and prohibited by Idle’s voiceover, confront the idyllic vision of a garden with the unseen and unsaid in institutionalized popular culture.

The group’s mockery of the BBC program indicates that the mass media rely mainly on clichéd material and cultural allusions well known to viewers. From the establishing shot, one realizes that the garden presented in the Pythons’ production has all the typical features that can be found in the majority of cultural representations produced on television. In fact, the intention was that the audience had to be provided with a conventional representation. This is especially accentuated in the group’s scenario of “The Money Programme” episode, that suggests the location must be “a beautiful well-stocked garden bed [and] ‘Gardening Club’ music” (2.83). Nevertheless, the script subsequently exceeds the recipients’ initial expectations as this conventional picture is transformed into a scene which presents visual mayhem. As the scene progresses, viewers confront the following events:

> After two seconds there are shrieks of licentious and lustful laughter. A nude woman pursues a city gent, both screaming with pleasure, into the middle of the flowerbed and they roll around smashing up the flowers in unbridled

> erotic orgy. Immediately two nuns run in to join the fun, followed by two Vikings, a gumby, a pantomime goose, etc. The whole of this orgy is speeded up. (2.83)

Here, as accentuated in the sketch, the comic surprise develops not out of an unexpected twist given to a specific genre but out of the audience's expectations and knowledge of the way television is "naturally" supposed to be. As Michael Palin recalled in one of his interviews, "our sort of reaction was against a . . . rather stifling world. It was not necessarily oppressive. It didn't hurt us. It wasn't unpleasant. It wasn't unkind. It was just very, very conventional" (Wagg 269). The standardized techniques and the ersatz imagery were used at the initial stage by Monty Python to pinpoint the nature of the television culture dominated by conventional forms of transmitting information and visual material. Even though the subsequent scene deconstructs its standardized dimension thanks to the exaggerated chaos of presented objects, there are plenty of elements that are meant to sustain the status of the mass media product. The scene is in line with the standards dictated by the consumer market, promoting values associated with color and image definition—lavish costume design, material authenticity, and period atmosphere—all contributed to the essential texture of such a production (Ridgman 144).[2]

At this stage, in order to understand Monty Python's visual strategies that recycle mass imagery, the concept of kitsch has to be introduced, as its aesthetic or discursive order[3] is skillfully applied in the majority of the group's sketches. It is crucial to highlight at this point that the group juggles with kitschy images borrowed from mass media sources. It is, according to Clement Greenberg, this usage of ready-made imagery and reinvention of conventions that aptly characterized and defined the concept of kitsch. In Greenberg's schema, kitsch functioned as an inauthentic popular culture that recycled high and low art, evoking artificial sentimentality and employing simulacra of genuine culture. This ersatz material, this imitation of high culture is constantly consumed by the masses. Soon

mechanical, schematic, and superficial kitsch became susceptible to manipulation by the cultural industry. Kitsch, according to Thomas Kulka, cannot be divorced from the socioeconomic conditions that stimulate a constant reproduction of images and motifs to satisfy the existing needs or expectations of consumers. This is a direct result of the fact that, as Thomas Kulka notices, “kitsch can jump on the bandwagon only after the novelty wears off and becomes the commonplace. Therefore, the objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable” (33) as its true nature lies in its aesthetic conventionality reproduced on a mass scale by cultural products.

As a result of the standardization of the presented material, addressees are attracted to kitsch by its inborn flattery, despite the fact that we often do not recognize that it is a form of bad taste. Seen in this light, one may realize that it is hard to appreciate, for instance, the garden without associating it with common kitsch representations in photographs, magazines, or postcards, constantly reproduced by our culture. The sketch initially invites the viewers into this idyllic picture of a domestic landscape and leisure and then rejects it completely at the final stage of the sketch. This strategy implies that categorization of objects in the mass media depends largely on one’s awareness and sociocultural perspective. The TV programs contain well-used patterns which viewers would never normally recognize as kitsch. The Pythons’ sketch ridicules this tendency, going beyond the represented artificiality and resisting the temptation of kitsch mechanisms by the usage of what is usually implicit in cultural productions. In effect, the sketch subverted decorum with its presentation of nudity, and it also “hollowed taboos concerning social institutions” (Landy 3).

Even though kitsch initially makes use of positive elements to evoke expected responses and attract the masses, its insincere purposes are inscribed in its very nature. As Ruth Lorand asserts, “kitsch is a form of deception that is both interesting and instructing. Its understanding can reveal some aspects of human weakness and desires, supplying thereby techniques of manipulating the public” (247). Analyzed from

techniques of manipulating the public" (247). Analyzed from this perspective, the Python's sketch alludes to modes of manipulative techniques employed by "innumerable institutions of regulation, the market-place and expressed and inchoate opinion. It offers an ordering of things, even to exaggerate the chaos and orderlessness of things" (Landy 3).

If kitsch is a parasite of beauty and good art, one may ask what the meaning of kitsch in the Monty Python series actually is. If kitsch is triggered off by heterogeneity, a characteristic feature of mass culture and the peculiar sense of freedom it promotes, and by a spontaneity that is alien to a transcendent idea of beauty or ugliness, then in the series kitsch becomes a tool to construct many forms of parody that utilize well-known and established objects and conventions. The following sections of this chapter will consider these visual and linguistic strategies of application of kitsch aesthetics in Monty Python's Flying Circus. As I will argue, this kitsch aesthetic enables the group to transgress and reassess a middle class "authority" formed to a large extent by the television medium and therefore by the consumer market.

First of all, the title of the series, Monty Python's Flying Circus, suggests the group's playful attitude towards kitsch-based reality. A circus, a form of popular entertainment, when analyzed through the Bakhtinian concept of carnivalesque laughter, implies the usage of aesthetic exaggeration and mockery of everything and everyone in a society. This travesty of formal register, mockery and masquerade, which is characteristic of a carnivalesque force, mix with oppositional mimetic expressions to produce a cultural transformation. In this way, the aesthetic hierarchy, which formerly positioned kitsch as an antithesis of art, is now no longer valid. On the contrary, kitsch in the hands of the Pythons is no longer an enemy but a tool to destabilize formulas and officialdom. Eventually, the Flying Circus becomes a world without rank and social hierarchy.

Secondly, kitsch aesthetics applied by the Pythons enabled the group to deconstruct structures of television genres and their conventional forms and models. This is particularly evident

while analyzing the distinctive features of satire, one of the most visible responses to the mass culture productions broadcast since the rise of a new socially oriented audience. As Robert Hewison notes, “from the very beginning English satire in general had often a cozy relationship with the institutions it criticized, for it grew up within them, and so found it difficult to avoid being stifled by the indulgence of its targets” (27).[4] Hence, a mutual dependence based on financial reliance controlled the content of much TV broadcasting, which was a mechanism to evoke positive responses from the audience. The Pythons, however, though broadcast by the BBC, skillfully tried to transgress this rigid order by crossing visual and semantic barriers. From the very beginning, they targeted more sophisticated tastes, expressing critical attitudes towards the “kitischification” of the entertainment world. They made use of culturally approved material and shrewdly revalued it against its own means. As Marcia Landy points out,

> the Pythons were trying to resist what is usually meant by satire . . . Monty Python was more interested in a truth that satirists hate to think: people do not want to change their minds and rarely change them in response to the lesson of satire. It is hard to face this without getting cynical. . . . Renouncing satire’s ineffectual upper hand, they took all their knowledge and redistributed it across the board, so you can never tell which character will know what. (31)

The construction of narrative helped the Pythons to transgress conventional genres. Divided and highly intertextual episodes are dynamic. The Pythons’ sketches utilize news, interviews, commercials, films, game shows, and documentaries, emphasizing the continuous and diverse nature of the mass media. This is a direct result of the fact that Monty Python’s Flying Circus was based on sketches that moved arbitrarily from one to the next, often interspersed with Terry Gilliam’s surreal animations (Wagg 270).[5] The animated elements, which also open each episode, deconstruct any

traditional narrative genre dominant at that time on British television. In effect, all pictorial elements are in constant motion, producing new meanings. We are not able to face a univocal meaning in the frame but have to read and interpret simultaneously contrasting and ambiguous messages consisting of text, object, and message. Thus the act of studying the picture has become a many-channeled activity. As Landy observes, “the objects of the animations, it would seem, not only satirize this genre but, more profoundly and philosophically, constitute an attack on existing forms of transmitting information” (45).

A similar revaluation of conventions is visible in the animations that introduce every episode. Initially, the viewers feel that all the trivial elements included in the opening are not incidental, that they may actually foreshadow the content of the sketches to come. Also the formal precision of their construction implies that these are not only embellishing pictures. The secret lies in the animation techniques that enabled the group to set certain elements in motion. These exuberant visual elements multiply and multiply, forming highly ornamented representations. Although kitsch aesthetics dominate here in the form of colorful images, this does not trigger an emotional response as it would with subject matters typically depicted by a manufactured aesthetics. The material here is devoid of any naturalistic or even realistic mode of representation.[6] The complexity and intensity of the presented images imply that we are stepping into unknown territory. Here, oversized figures, deformed creatures, and surreal architectural images invite the audience to participate in absurdity, and common sense cannot hold.

These short animations resemble a collage of separate vignettes from different areas, often bordering on bad taste. The colorful floral motifs, machine constructions, popular culture icons, and famous personas are all ascribed to one category that is eventually transformed largely by the complex and heterogeneous aesthetics of the advertising industry. A highly manufactured and glossy texture adds only to the “kitschiness” of the images. This effect is achieved “by departing from the

of the images. This effect is achieved "by departing from the straight photography that gives the photographic image its special closeness to nature, due to its unmediated character" (Kulka 93). Retouching and photomontage polish a kind of special effect that, according to Thomas Kulka, defines the aesthetics of kitsch.

Certain "falsification" techniques are particularly accentuated in those sketches and scenes that ape the ambiance of cinematic genres from the past to catch their uniqueness, originality, and authenticity. The sketch "A Scotsman on a horse" (episode 6), aptly illustrates this tendency.

> A Scotsman (John) rides up to the camera and looks around puzzled. In long-shot we see him riding off. At a wee Scottish kirk another Scotsman (Michael) is waiting at the head of the aisle to be married. Intercut between first Scotsman galloping through the countryside and the wedding procession coming up the aisle. The wedding takes place; just as it finishes the first Scotsman rides up to the kirk and rushes in. The assembled congregation look at him in alarm as he surveys them; then he picks up Michael and carries him off. (1.76)

This sketch makes use of a retro kitsch aesthetics to indicate that society is bombarded with television productions that evoke a nostalgia for the "good old days." Processes enacted by technological reproduction allow the mass media to celebrate the apparent stability of life in the past. From this perspective, the past is idealized into a safe and coherent environment in opposition to a difficult and complex present. The mass media productions condemn a discontinuous present and "experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence" (Bertens 119). In this way, a kitsch aesthetic is a bulwark against change. But the Pythons consciously resign from such a strategy, overused by the cultural industry. The episode again deconstructs a conventional ending, working

against viewers' expectations based on melodrama. Therefore, the retro kitsch used by the group infiltrates the cultural industry, wrecking it from the inside. This is a move to post-ironic and self-conscious kitsch, which may offer the possibility to oppose mass media manipulation.

To accentuate the absurdities of the existing division between kitsch and art propagated by the mass media, Monty Python also mocks "the pretentiousness of television (particularly the BBC and public television) in its recycling of masterpieces as an ostensible means to elevate high class taste" (Landy 84). It is worth emphasizing that references to canonical works of literature and art are present everywhere in the Flying Circus series. While juggling with ready-made material, sketches often reuse those mass-media reproduction mechanisms that promise an aesthetic escape from the commonplace. However, if we take into account the fact that kitsch appears at a time when "beauty"/ high art is easy to fabricate, reproduce, buy and sell, then genuine art becomes only a product and a form of decoration employed by the capitalist market and sold to passive consumers. So it is difficult to differentiate genuine art from mass-produced objects. The Pythons' works indicate that when there is a fusion of high and low culture there is no point in questioning the mass-culture forms, or invoking canonical artistic forms. As Marcia Landy asserts, "the art sketches offer insights into the more serious dimensions of Python silliness as a challenge to the clichés of ordinary discourses and a sign that not everything merits high seriousness and reverence" (84). The sketch "Art gallery" (episode 4), illustrates the attitude of the working class towards what was formerly perceived as elite culture. Two middle-aged working mothers enter a gallery.

> JANET: (firmly) No, well Kevin knows (slaps the infant) that if he spits at a painting I'll never take him to an exhibition again.
> MARGE: Ralph used to spit—he could hit a Van Gogh at thirty yards. But he knows now it's wrong—don't you Ralph?

(she looks down) Ralph! Stop it! Stop it! Stop chewing that Turner! You are . . . (she disappears from shot) You are a naughty, naughty, vicious little boy. (smack; she comes back into shot holding a copy of Turner's Fighting Temeraire in a lovely gilt frame but all tattered) Oh, look at that! The Fighting Temeraire—ruined! What shall I do?
JANET: (taking control) Now don't do a thing with it love, just put it in the bin over there.
MARGE: Really?
JANET: Yes take my word for it, Marge. Kevin's eaten most of the early nineteenth-century British landscape artists, and I've learned not to worry. As a matter of fact, I feel a bit peckish myself. (she breaks a bit off the Turner) Yes . . . Marge also tastes a bit.
MARGE: I never used to like Turner.
JANET: (swallowing) No . . . I don't know much about art, but I know what I like. (1.43)

Monty Python sketches in large part represent a comedic voice against a lower-middle-class dependent on consumer culture. Reproduction, falsification, commoditization, aesthetic manipulation—these were the methods employed by the British mass media that eventually formed the cultural map of society in the 1960s. In fact, the image that we get from the television might be easily named Kitsch Britannia. To oppose the manipulation of society, the Pythons applied an absurd humor that undermined clichés through constant inversions and deconstructions of standard broadcast material. In doing so, they alluded to kitsch aesthetics, which mystifies the matter of images, to question and dramatize ways of seeing and believing (Landy 36). While investigating the nature of kitsch and the Flying Circus episodes from the perspective of mass culture studies, it can be concluded that there have been many difficulties to define the limits and complexities of both the series and kitschy aesthetics. This parallel shows that they both still have potential for endless interpretations.

NOTES

The title of this article refers to a series of articles from 2003 published in the New Statesman devoted to the life of the Royal Family and the Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace.

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Down? Popular Media Culture in Post-war Britain. Eds Dominic Strinati and Stephen Wagg. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. 254–84. Print.

1. That was the name given to the culture associated with the economic boom of the mid-fifties that transformed the daily life of the majority of British citizens, dissolving the old economic class divisions and former antagonisms. With the increased mass production, soaring stock market values, better financial conditions resulting from the low unemployment rate, and more advanced services and technologies, Great Britain soon restored its pre-war stability.
2. This process was visible also in the serial The Forsyte Saga broadcast on BBC 2 over twenty-six weeks in 1968 (Ridgman 144).
3. As Ruth Lorand points out, “kitsch is a discursive order disguising itself as an aesthetic order: its apparent order is aesthetic, its hidden order is discursive, rambling, moving from topic to topic without a proper order” (246). The discursive nature derives from the fluidity of the subject matter.
4. This form of comedy in the television programs was born out of and expressed the changes within the post-war society dominated by values of consumer capitalism. The principal thrust of the comedy has been towards “the elevation of private sphere of individual activities and decision-making at the expense of parliamentary and political deliberation” (Wagg 255).
5. It is crucial to highlight at this point that Terry Gilliam before he started his cooperation with the Pythons worked as a freelance illustrator for magazines (Landy 12).
6. Thomas Kulka: “Kitsch typically displays considerable disregard for detail. It could thus hardly be naturalistic or realistic in the traditional sense. . . . Kitsch can never be regarded as ‘realistic’ in the conventionalist sense, according to which realism is determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time. Kitsch uses the most conventional, standard, well-tried and tested representational canons to achieve its aims” (31).

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Tomasz Dobrogoszcz originally wished to become a lumberjack, but after his fifth rejection he resorted to an academic career at the University of Łódź, in the fields of British fiction and literary translation. He has published articles on such writers as Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, Sarah Kane, John Banville, and E.M. Forster. He has translated into Polish Homi K. Bhabha's The Location of Culture, for which he is wanted by the Spanish Inquisition. Currently, he invites the characters of Ian McEwan's novels to daily psychoanalytic sessions, where he applies Lacanian methods to explain to them the meaning of their textual lives.

*

Stephen Butler has been playing center forward for the German philosophers' football team since late 2006, replacing Nietzsche as the existentialist thinker for the contemporary period, especially in relation to modern and contemporary fiction. When not denying free will to all and sundry, he has been known to teach, as fate has decreed, in the past at the Politechnika Koszalińska and, currently, the University of Ulster. Various publications on modern and contemporary novelists and poets such as Paul Muldoon, John Banville, J.G. Ballard, and Tony Harrison only serve to illustrate that, like his teammate Ludwig Wittgenstein, he has nothing to advance the cause of his specialist areas. His students and colleagues will testify in a court of law that he has four miles of tubing in his stomach.

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Kevin F. Kern received a B.A. in history and anthropology and an M.A. in anthropology from Kent State University; and an M.A. and a Ph.D. in history from Bowling Green State University. He currently teaches at the University of Akron in Ohio, where he is an associate professor of history. He has been studying the work of Monty Python since 1974, when he would sneak out of his room long after his bedtime to watch the show secretly late at night on his local public television station.

Wojciech Klepuszewski began the Pythonesque dimension of his life in 1998, when he joined the world of academia, whose members soon appeared to him, to quote from David Lodge's novel Nice Work, "all sort of queer folk, carrying on with each other something chronic." As a result, his initial research that comprised war poetry gradually shifted towards what may broadly be labeled as academic fiction.

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Richard Mills is a senior lecturer in Irish literature and popular culture at St. Mary's University College, London. Publications include articles on Irish themes for Irish Studies Review, Writing Ulster, and New Voices in Irish Criticism. Recent publications are chapters in Popular Music and Television in Britain (Ashgate, 2010), Fifty Years with the Beatles: The Impact of the Beatles on Contemporary Culture (Łódź, 2010), and The Playful Air of Light(ness) in Irish Literature and Culture (Newcastle, 2011). He is currently working on a book entitled The Beatles and their Audience. Mills dedicates his chapter on long-haired, counter-cultural Pythons to "that voice inside your head who talks when you read stuff."

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Adam Sumera is a senior lecturer in the Department of British Literature and Culture, University of Łódź. His publications include Muriel Spark's Novels (Łódź, 1996), "Intertextuality in Literary Translation" in Translation and Meaning, eds. Barbara Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk and Marcel Thelen (Maastricht, 2002), "Ian McEwan's The Innocent: The Novel and the Movie" in Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies, 21.2, 2010. He does his best to look on the bright side of life.