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Who's in on the Joke: Parody as Hybridized Narrative Discourse

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Mikhail Bakhtin calls parody the "creation of a decrowning double."[1] It is richly dialogized and hence destabilizing. Yet if the parody runs in only one direction, if the parodizing narrative frame, the containing discourse, is allowed to stand safety outside what is being parodied, the contained and in this case, embedded discourse, then it loses some of the double-voicedness that Bakhtin so justly celebrates. This has been recognized by Linda Hutcheon, who emphasizes "the bidirectionality of the legitimacy of parody." Parody is "both textual doubling (which unifies and reconciles) and differentiation (which foregrounds irreconcilable opposition between texts and between texts and 'world')." It is both "conservative and transformative," and thus, an "authorized transgression."[2] I will look at Robert Altman's *Nashville* and Wim Wenders's *The American Friend* to draw a distinction between simple or unidirectional parody and what we might call hybridized parody, a form of parody that celebrates its bidirectionality by challenging the discourse that contains it.

Bakhtin defines parody as the author speaking in someone else's discourse but with "a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one." The text, then, "becomes an arena of battle between two voices."[3] For my purposes here, the two voices are identified as the narrating discourse, that which constructs the diegesis, and the alien discourse, that which is both contained in the diegesis and which is "derived from an anterior text"[4] by a transformation brought about by the narrating discourse. The "imitation with a critical difference"[5] then comes from the tension or the warpage between these two voices, each of which insists on its own authority.

The distinction between simple and hybridized parody suggests two different arenas in which parody does battle. In simple parody, the hierarchy of discourses is maintained; the narrating discourse marks, but does not enter, the arena. The alien discourse remains within the diegesis and has no interaction with the narrating discourse. The movement of the parody is parallel with respect to the narrating discourse. Simple parody remains as commentary on a preexistent profilmic world. In hybridized parody, the parodied discourse challenges the diegetic frame, the construction of the profilmic world itself, by reasserting its legitimacy against the

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narrating discourse that is trying to undermine it. There is a constant struggle between transformation and tradition, with the resultant breakdown of a clear hierarchy of discourse.

That this is possible illustrates one of the central elements of Bakhtin's thought. To him, the novel is concerned with "the speaking person and his discourse,"[6] both narrative and diegetic discourse. Bakhtin questions any privileging of the narrative agency, suggesting that although it constructs the diegesis, the vocabulary that makes that construction possible is public, both to the world beyond the novel and, more important, to the discourse within it. The narrating agency can define the diegetic world, but by dialogizing the narrating discourse, the alien discourse can in effect "speak back" and challenge that definition. The discourse of the other thus coexists with and actively battles the discourse of the narrator. Its movement is perpendicular with respect to the narrating frame. And it is never resolved. Meaning lies in the tension between the discourses, rather than in any dominance of one over the other.

Bakhtin calls this a hybrid construction,[7] "an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical (syntactic) and compositional markers to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two 'languages,' two semantic and axiological belief systems." Further, "there is no formal—compositional and syntactic—boundary between these utterances, style, languages, belief systems," so that "it frequently happens that even one and the same word will belong simultaneously to two languages, two belief systems that intersect in a hybrid construction—and, consequently, the word has two contradictory meanings, two accents."[8] It is both quoted and not quoted, enclosed in intonational quotation marks but not textual ones—a construction analogous to free indirect discourse in literature.

Bakhtin's examples of hybridization are from Dickens's novel *Little Dorrit*. He looks at the word "consequently" in the sentence, "But Mr. Tite Barnacle was a buttoned-up man, and consequently a weighty one."[9] David Bordwell suggests that "as character discourse, the world ["consequently"] renders the society's judgment of Mr. Barnacle; as narration, the word mocks logic . . . and ironically equates concealment with importance."[10] While this is true, something else happens. By allowing a word of narration to be claimed also by the parodied other, the unitary authority of the narration breaks down. The narrator's use of the word "consequently" is set against its use by the alien discourse, and thus the narrator's use becomes explicitly dialogized, that is, acknowledged to have many meanings, all of which have equal claim to validity in the proper context. Dickens's sentence functions differently from a sentence like "Mr. Barnacle was a buttoned-up man. People say that that makes him weighty," in which the people's judgment does not challenge the authority of the narrating discourse.

Now, of course, the alien discourse does not literally "speak back" as though it were an independent agency. Actually, it is not alien at all but an expression of the narrator's ambivalence, both a rejection and also an embracing of the alien discourse, Hutcheon's "transformative and conservative." No matter how much the narrating agency protests in *Little Dorrit*, it still seems intrigued by the word "consequently." Genette notes in the case of Flaubert the remarkable advantage that he "derived from this ambiguity, which permits him to makes his own language

speak this both loathsome and fascinating idiom of the 'other' without being wholly compromised or wholly innocent."[11] Here, I will use the term "speak back" while acknowledging that the alien discourse is not autonomous and that the characters who possess it are mere fictive narrative constructs, because the "speaking back" suggests the alien discourse's potential for questioning the narrative authority. "The very act of parodying invests the Other with both authority and an exchange value in relation to literary norms," notes Hutcheon.[12] This suggests the notion of narrative discourse as inherently uncertain or of several minds that Bakhtin sees as implicit in double-voiced discourse, arguing that the structural uncertainty or ambiguity is necessary for dialogization and change. He distinguishes novelistic discourse from rhetorical discourse by nothing that the latter "is not fertilized by a deep-rooted connection with the forces of historical becoming that serve to stratify language, and therefore rhetorical genres are at best merely a distanced echo of this becoming, narrowed down to an individual polemic."[13]

Hybridization then provokes battle because the narrating discourse contains within it the alien discourse, forcing the narrating discourse to war with the alien discourse over this shared language. Neither side ever wins; both meanings simultaneously prevail. "It is precisely the diversity of speech, and not the unity of a normative shared language, that is the ground of style."[14] The implications of this are enormous. If the narrating discourse itself is hybridized by the very discourse it is parodying, then the narrating discourse must defend itself and attempt to reassert its meaning. Thus, the word "consequently," which is both part of the narrating and the alien discourse, creates a zone of uncertainty, of tension, around it, precisely because it is able to move one way or the other. Bakhtin calls this a "speech zone."[15]

Of course, in film, speech does not have this impact because the narrating discourse of film does not create the diegesis through words alone in the way it does in literature. In film, the narrator has the power to make an image, to shape an optical and aural moving representation of the world. This making of the image is what must be hybridized. Character speech challenges only a part of this. To speak back, to truly have exchange, the alien discourse must be allowed to create an alternate image of the world, a parodying double, which will expose or reify the narrator's image in much the same way that hybridized discourse exposes the language of the narrator. There must be something like a speech zone in which the parodied can turn back on the parodying the image of its own, in this case image-making, language.

Nashville does not reflect back on its narrating frame the image of its own discourse. It never addresses a fundamental contradiction in its design, that is, the alien voices within the diegesis are given the illusion of being free, while the whole structure of the film is telling us they are not. Even the appearance of actors playing themselves serves not to expose their star persona but in fact to heighten it, because rather then questioning the mechanism by which they were made into stars, the alien discourse seeks legitimacy by cozying up and asserting its apparent equality to the "visiting" celebrities. *Nashville*, then, is an example of simple or unidirectional parody. *The American Friend*, however, contains bidirectional or hybridizing parody. The subject of this film is not merely the diegetic world but rather the interplay between the represented and the act of representing, between the lan-

guage and the image of the language. The appearance of the film director, Nicholas Ray, playing a character is not neutralized as in *Nashville* but explicitly acknowledged as an alternative image-making voice, specifically exposing the mechanisms that construct the film's diegesis.

Nashville's credit sequence is modeled after a cheap television ad for a greatest hits album with the names of the performers rolling up the screen while a huckster announcer reads them aloud. This sequence immediately locates us. But the clue is extradiegetic; the alien discourse, embodied by the characters within the narrative, has no knowledge of it.

Next we see a campaign bumper sticker for Hal Phillip Walker which says "Walker Talker Sleeper." A Walker sound truck tells us that we are involved in politics whether we like it or not, yet the greatest hits record and the "Walker Talker Sleeper" bumper sticker serve to make us suspicious of advertising discourse of any kind. Again, this parody, this hostile reworking of the discourse of another, is recognized by us and the narrator because of a juxtaposition of images that are not apparent to the diegetic world.

Then we cut to a long pan over studio musicians isolated in their glass booths which ends with country star Haven Hamilton singing "We Must Be Doing Something Right to Last Two Hundred Years." Again, we are aware of the clash of voices. What have we been doing right? Selling records on television? Creating nonsense political slogans?

Finally, we go to a gospel studio and in a static full shot are shown a group of singers gathered around one mike. This more "natural" setup works backward and parodies the manufactured sound of Hamilton's studio.

Each of these scenes is followed by a scene that retroactively parodies it. The parodying scenes act as commentary on a secure diegetic world rather than as a threat to that world. This is most apparent in the final assassination scene. Since it is the last scene, it is referenced in advance. Discussions of assassinations and social despair dot the film: Opal's talk with Pearl about the Kennedys, Opal's theory of political violence being the responsibility of those who own guns, and the troubled song referring to Watergate and gas lines which opens the final scene, "I Wonder What this Year Will Bring." The assassination itself seems to happen simply because a space has been made for it—but it is a comfortable space, one offered by the narrator without being challenged to provide it. The unexplained assassination, a parody of a decade of assassinations and despair, does not do battle at all with the narrating voice. In fact, it is the narrating voice disguised as alien discourse, simply imposed over a compliant diegetic world, that lacks any voice to speak back.

In *The American Friend*, Nicholas Ray plays Derwatt, a painter whose works are now more valuable because he has faked his own death. Ray, film director as painter, stares at a canvas, covering first one eye, then the other, flattening perspective and reducing the world to two dimensions. He is thus immediately identified as an image-maker, someone who has voice, who can speak back to the narrating discourse. This is so close to the surface that when we cut to the German character Jonathan for the first time and the extradiegetic music turns threatening and ominous, we wonder if the change was not authorized by the painter. An image of a moving locomotive, in the style of the locomotives painted by Derwatt, turns up on Jonathan's son's lampshade. Optical toys function both as elements of the diegesis

and as instances of images literally manipulated by the alien discourse in much the way the narrating discourse manipulates the diegesis.

Derwatt's authority passes to Dennis Hopper, playing the art dealer Ripley, who wears his cowboy hat in Hamburg, drives a white T-Bird, and eats Corn Flakes on a pool table under a bare light in a ramshackle old building that resembles the White House. By acknowledging this parodic juxtaposition, he becomes not only a character but also an icon, or to put it in Bakhtin terms, he is language, a signifier of a character, and also the reified image of a language, a signifier stripped of normal context. He will be a literal autonomous "friend" to Jonathan, the Swiss-German "hero" in the film, and also the figurative embodiment of a genre that will be Jonathan's fate.[16]

The alien voices, image-creating alien voices, penetrate the narrative frame. The narrating images themselves become dialogized; they have to reassert their meaning, their claim to the images (e.g., the white T-Bird or Derwartt's paintings) that the alien voices are demanding for their own. The discourse is hybridized.

In *Nashville*, the alien discourse, the collective voice of the array of characters, is insisting that it is free. "I can become a star," it seems to be saying. Or maybe, "Being a star will gave meaning to my life." The narrating discourse is mocking that illusion of freedom, transforming the alien discourse by satirical (in Hutcheon's sense of the word) juxtaposition. Since the alien voice has no way to dialogize the framing voice—it cannot enter into discourse with it, it remains hierarchically subservient to it—the parody is merely unidirectional. The alien discourse is being made fun of. It is not allowed to speak back.

A digression is in order here. We are considering narrative strategy rather than overt content. Certainly, there is character defiance in *Nashville*—to take one example, the refrain, "It don't worry me. You may say I ain't free. But it don't worry me," which is sung repeatedly after the assassination that ends the film. Yet this merely reinforces the unidirectionality of the parody. The alien voice sings "You may say I ain't free" without ever being aware of what keeps it bound. The authority in the film, the lack of freedom, stems not from the assassinations but from the effaced dominance of the narrating discourse.

In *The American Friend*, the alien discourse, in this case Jonathans' is also insisting on its freedom. It is an anterior text in that Jonathan is initially presented in a replay of a stock film noir situation—an innocent man unaware of being fingered while the circumstances close in around him. Here, too, the narrating discourse is mocking his illusion of freedom, suggesting the limitations of a freedom that is cast in terms of imported cultural models. Yet this parody is bidirectional. It arises not so much in the narrating agency's attempt to graft American icons on an "innocent" German frame maker as in the pull, the warpage, between the narrator's struggle to impose the noir model as a means of undercutting the illusion of freedom (transformative) and the alien discourse's resistance to that imposition (conservative). It is in the fact of this conflict of voice rather than in an static transformation of the alien discourse.

This double-voiced discourse is developed throughout the film. Jonathan is fingered by Ripley as a potential killer for the mob. When Jonathan makes the decision to go along, he carefully separates a foil of gold leaf and places it in his hand. He picks up the telephone, holds it with the gold leaf between the receiver

and his palm, and calls Paris, accepting the mob's money. Thus, he makes a literal embodiment of the figure, "greasing or creasing his palm with gold."[17]

Within the diegetic world, there is no causal explanation for why Jonathan does this. Although we can assume that as a frame maker he sometimes works with gold leaf, there is no evidence that he would be working with it now. At the level of the diegesis, the gold leaf cannot be explained in the same way that Haven Hamilton's song "Two Hundred Years" can be explained in *Nashville*: it just happened to be there for the narrator's and the viewer's amusement. Rather, the greasing seems to be an acknowledgment by the character of what he is about to do, an indication that he is aware of the ramifications, the beginning of an alternative image-making that will ultimately allow him to speak back to the narrating frame. His play with the gold leaf redirects the image's force away from its narrative purpose of dramatizing his giving into the mob (i.e., simple parody of the innocent dupe) to the character's, the alien discourse's, purpose of subverting the authority of the narrating frame by showing how conscious the alien discourse is of the parodied situation it is allowing itself to enter.

Jonathan owns a frame shop; the frames both exist in the shop and are referenced as the image of language, as the metaphor of being framed. This is similar to other filmic plays on verbal expressions. In *Strangers on a Train*, Hitchcock makes an elaborate play on the expression "crisscross" and "double-cross" by intercutting crossed railroad tracks, legs, tennis rackets.[18] However, as in *Nashville*, the play in *Strangers on a Train* is extradiegetic, that is, constructed for the spectator but not accessible to the diegetic world where the pattern cannot be seen. But when Jonathan holds the frame over his head, it is not presented with such a sideways wink, its meaning obvious only to us. In case we doubt this, his next response is to rip the frame from over his head and smash it on the counter, trying to deny its effect on him. Here, we have a mingling of discourse in much the way we see it in Dickens where one word is shown to belong to both the narrative and alien voices. Instead of the frame being simply a frame to Jonathan while it is an embodiment of his fate to us, he too sees it for what it is—thus entering on a level that makes discourse possible with the narrating voice. His action, once discourse is possible, is to smash it, to deny its authority.

The end of the film has been read in different ways. Jonathan suffers from an incurable blood disease. It is the manipulation of the results of his blood test that leads him to murder. The film ends with Jonathan betraying Ripley, driving away, and then dying at the wheel. Some commentators read this as a fatal recurrent of the blood disease, timed to signal the arbitrariness of the end of the movie.[19] Yet Jonathan conspicuously bites on a pill in the moments right before his death, something that, although ill, he has not done before. Soon thereafter he asks his wife to tell his son their story. It is thus possible to read the end as a suicide, as a protest against his narrated fate, in the same way that smashing the frame was a protest against the narrative frame that is constricting his life.[20]

I am not suggesting he kills himself in response to the facts of his life as those facts might be presumed to exist outside the narrative frame. He is not killing himself because he is doomed to die anyway. That would be to consider Jonathan as fiction, not as text, or as imaginary, not as alien discourse. And as such, it would not be a challenge to the narrating frame. The suicide seems to be the alien discourse's

response to the genre frame it has been defined by, a denial of being cast as a parodied figure, a dupe in one more transposed American film noir, and thus it is the ultimate act of turning the narration back on itself, of revealing it as an image of itself. On its own terms, then, the alien discourse becomes able to make a contrasting image that reveals the narration as an object, a reified genre construct, and shifts the meaning of the film from a simple parody of an innocent man made killer to a hybridized parody about the interplay between our apparent freedom and the restricting authority of the images we use to define that freedom.

Nashville uses simple, unidirectional parody to create alien discourse within the diegetic world. But that discourse does not challenge the narrating frame. It turns a single mirror on the world outside the film, creating a parodied reflection but ignoring the question of what gives the mirror authority in the first place. By contrast, *The American Friend* uses hybridized parody, a double-mirrored discourse that allows exchange between narrating and alien voices. "Languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror."[21] This mirrored discourse focuses the parody outward, from the world of the film to the larger issue of how genre, and authorized discourse, colonize our imagination.

Parody is decrowning, a world turned inside out. But out laughter will ring hollow if the joke comes at the expense of a diegetic world that is denied discourse with its narrating agency. The security of that situation (that we and the narrator know while the alien voices within the diegetic world do not) undermines any dislocation we may feel. The ultimate irony of all parody is its acknowledgment that we can never escape from the voices that shape our experience even as we parody them, because they are part of our heteroglossia. Hutcheon recognizes this when she notes that Lukas Foss calls his compositions a "'particular act of love-violence.'"[22] Love-violence requires that the alien discourse be allowed to speak back to the narrating frame, to question its authority, to leaven the transformation sought by parody with a celebration of what is being parodied, a resistance to the transformation. Only in this way will the dialogization of both the parodied alien voice and the parodying narrating voice be revealed in their discourse.

NOTES

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 127.
2. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 101-102.
3. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 193.
4. Gerard Genette, *Palimpsestes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982), 14.
5. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 36.
6. M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 332.
7. Bakhtin's hybrid constructions are similar to what Mieke Bal calls "text interference," but Bal's use of the term "narrative levels," like Genette's, does not suggest the fluidity of interaction between voices

that Bakhtin identifies as dialogical. See Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 137-138.

8. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 304-305.
9. Ibid., 305.
10. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 20.
11. Gerard Genetee, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 172.
12. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 77.
13. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 325.
14. Ibid., 308.
15. These last six paragraphs are not intended to be a literal reading of Bakhtin but an extension of what I think is implicit in his approach. I am aware there are sections of Bakhtin that would seem to contradict this, including his insistence on a hierarchy of voices, just as there are sections that would support it. My concern about the integrity of the narrating frame comes from more contemporary theorists (Mieke Bal, Gerard Genette, Ann Banfield, Edward Branigan, Susan Sniader Lanser, to name a few). In effect, this paper is meant to be a fusing of these two approaches.
16. I am not challenging the ultimate effacement of the extradiegetic narration which is inherent in all fictional discourse. Obviously, extradiegetic narration is always privileged in that everything within the diegesis exists at its pleasure. Derwatt can never overrule Wenders. Yet granting that limit, the narrating frame can be addressed, as it is here. See, for example, Edward R. Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema* (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1984), passim, and Jeffrey S. Rush, "'Lyric Oneness': The Free Syntactical Indirect and the Boundary between Narrative and Narration," *Wide Angle* 8, 3/4 (Fall 1986) for further discussion of this effacement.
17. As far as I can determine, the expression "to grease one's palm with gold," or "to crease one's palm with gold," is not a German idiom. Thus, Jonathan's play with the gold leaf also signals a willingness to accept English as the language of the figuration of his fate.
18. Ronald Christ, "Strangers on a Train: The Pattern of Encounter," in *Focus on Hitchcock*, ed. Albert J. LaValley (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972).
19. See, for instance, Karen Jaehne, "The American Friend," *Sight and Sound* XLVII, 2 (Spring 1978): 103.
20. I want to thank my students Stefani Koorey and Natalie Sokoloff for first suggesting the suicide.
21. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 414-415.
22. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*. 102.