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Jokes and the Discourse on Disaster

Jokes are ideational structures that are characterized by appropriate incongruity. Analyzing appropriate incongruities can lead to the formulation of a joke's base meaning, but performance meanings are varied and should be formulated with reference to specific cultural, social, and psychological environments. The cycle of jokes that followed the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger on 28 January 1986 may be understood without reference to depth psychology but rather by viewing their appropriate incongruities in relation to the conventions of public discourse.

LAST YEAR I received a telephone call from a newspaperwoman who was preparing an article on how men use humor to harass women in the workplace. She needed both joke material and commentary, and she asked for my help. I provided her with the following example:

A businessman was having economic difficulties and was in the position of having to dismiss some of his employees. He had three secretaries, and he would have to let two of them go, but he didn't know which two to let go and which one to keep. He explained his dilemma to a colleague over lunch one day, and the friend made the following suggestion:

"Listen, this may cost you a little money up front, but it will be well worth it and will pay for itself in the long run. Next payday, add an extra five hundred dollars to each of their paychecks and see how they respond. That will give you an idea of whom to keep."

The next payday came around and he took his friend's advice. The first secretary looked at her check and said to herself, "The boss overpaid me by five hundred dollars. I'd better get that extra money back to him right away. I know the business is in trouble and he can't afford such errors."

The second secretary looked at her check and said to herself: "He overpaid me by five hundred dollars. He will eventually discover the error, but in the meantime, I will bank the money. When he asks me to give it back I'll return it, but I will get to keep whatever interest accumulates."

The third secretary looked at her check and said to herself: "He overpaid me by five hundred dollars. He'll eventually discover his mistake and ask for the money back, but I won't give it back. I'll just quit. The business is not doing all that well and it will probably go under. At least I'll be five hundred dollars ahead."

Which secretary got to keep her job?

The one with the big tits.

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I asked the newspaper reporter if this was the kind of material that she had in mind. She said that it was precisely the kind of material she had in mind. I did go on, however, to point out a few interesting properties of that joke.

The Messages of Jokes

Joking is popularly viewed as sexual and aggressive in its intention. This view is generally supported by pointing to the large number of jokes that explicitly refer to things sexual and/or aggressive, as in our above example. This view is also generally regarded as essentially Freudian (1960:97), although it probably owes as much to Thomas Hobbes and his egoistic psychology (1907:33). In any event, the position is certainly compatible with Freud's theory, which is, however, significantly more complex and sophisticated.

The only perspective that approaches psychoanalytic theory in its global applicability to the analysis of humor is incongruity theory. Incongruity theory was already fully formulated early in the 18th century: "Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them" (Beattie 1778:347). To translate this into modern terminology: the perception of humor depends upon the perception of an appropriate incongruity—that is, the perception of an appropriate interrelationship of domains that are generally regarded as incongruous in a particular frame (Oring 1981:40–43). The way appropriateness is established between two domains is generally a function of what I would call the humorous technique. The folk riddle offers a rather transparent example:

Q: What has a head but can't think?
A: A cabbage; a pin; a match; a beer; an undergraduate.

The incongruity explicitly articulated in the riddle question is made appropriate in the riddle answer. The word "head" is to be taken in two senses; one literal, the other figurative. The technique utilized is double meaning. We should note that the humorous techniques, which establish the relation between the incongruous domains, often run counter to logical or bona fide modes of thought (Freud 1960:125).

Although I would argue that the perception of appropriate incongruity underlies all humor, the delineation of this ideational structure is by no means as transparent as it is in the riddle. Nor are the techniques by which appropriateness is recognized so spuriously engendered. The following is a witticism of G. C. von Lichtenberg, which was discussed by Freud:

Not only did he disbelieve in ghosts;
he was not even frightened of them. [Freud 1960:92]

Explicating the structure and the technique here is somewhat more difficult. The incongruity derives from the recognition that the second proposition (he was unafraid of ghosts) is implied in the first (he disbelieved in ghosts), but the language in which the whole is formulated ("he was not *even* afraid of them") suggests that the second proposition is novel and not at all implied by the first. The appropriateness of this incongruity depends upon the recognition that an intellectual denial of the existence of ghosts is, in fact, distinct from an imperviousness to a fear of them. Many of us would deny our belief in ghosts but would be loath to spend a night alone in a graveyard. Assertions of belief and emotional dispositions are not necessarily one and the same.

Note that the means by which the appropriateness is achieved in von Lichtenberg's witticism is not the result of some artificial linguistic technique, but is embedded in a particular understanding of the world. Joke audiences must often call upon these complex yet intuitive understandings if a joke is to be recognized and appreciated. Jokes depend upon a community of knowledge and interpretation. Jokes communicate only when audiences are able to simultaneously access similar yet unstated categories, orientations, and experiences.

At this point it may be worthwhile to reconsider the joke about the businessman and his three secretaries. Before we should speculate about the intentions of someone who would tell such a joke, we should try and analyze its ideational structure in terms of the operative appropriate incongruity. The incongruity revolves around an elaborate strategy seemingly designed to assess honesty, loyalty, and responsibility in the workplace. These traits are totally ignored, however, in reaching the final decision about which secretary to employ. The appropriateness of this incongruity depends upon the recognition of the pervasiveness of sexual motivations and their power to shape even nonsexual behaviors. In its most abstract formulation (its deep structure), this joke seems to be about the opposition of reason and instinct. This, I would argue, is its *base meaning*. Base meanings, it should be noted, cannot be formulated as statements; at best they can be formulated as oppositions. Very different jokes may share a similar base. Thus von Lichtenberg's witticism about the belief in ghosts surprisingly shares a similar base as the secretary joke: the opposition between thought and feeling. A joke also has what may be termed *propositional meanings*. Propositional meanings may be formulated as propositions that proceed from the base but incorporate aspects of "plot" (if the joke is in narrative form) and specific elements of content. Thus in the narrative line of the secretary joke, instinct triumphs over reason. Taking into account the specific elements of the joke's contents, we might elaborate that male sexuality overcomes rational economic calculation. This, we might argue, is the joke's propositional meaning. We would also argue that like a proverb, a joke also has specific *performance* meanings that are only discernible in situations of performance in relation to particular tellers, audiences, settings, and interactions (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973).

While I would suggest that a joke has only one base meaning, a joke may have innumerable performance meanings. This is not to say that there is no restriction on the range of performance meanings, for they should all be restricted by and be reducible to the base. If there were no restrictions on the meanings of a joke (or any other folklore text, for that matter), any text would be appropriate for any situation, and this is certainly not the case. Indeed, we should only need one text that we would then perform on all occasions, as it would be capable of bearing an infinity of meanings. (This would make the definition of folklore a lot easier but it would make the study of folklore a lot less interesting).

We are now in a position to speculate about someone who would tell or appreciate the joke about the businessman and his secretaries: that is, we are capable of imagining some plausible performance meanings. Several possibilities come immediately to mind:

1. The joke is a hostile expression that denigrates women by transforming them exclusively into sexual objects through coarse reference to their anatomies.
2. The joke is meant to stimulate and arouse through an allusion to the omnipresence of sexual forces and by the direct reference to specific sexual features.
3. The joke is meant to ridicule males who allow sexual impulses to overpower critical reason and judgment.
4. The joke is meant to celebrate male sexuality and the male dedication to sexual pursuit in all circumstances and climes no matter how unsuitable. As such it is an affirmation of sexuality and the "lust for life."

I think I could go on. The point is that we can assign no single performance meaning to the joke. We can only hypothesize plausible alternatives that proceed from the base and propositional meanings.

To briefly summarize: (1) jokes are predicated on the perception of appropriate incongruities: (2) appropriate incongruities are the locus of a joke's base meaning; (3) a joke may carry a number but not unlimited number of performance meanings that are inspired by divers motives.

It seems to me that the extent to which an interpretation of jokes is "successful" depends upon the extent it proceeds from a close and critical analysis of the structure, plot, and content of the joke texts, *and* the extent to which it is able to plausibly relate this textual analysis to specific aspects of the cultural, social, or psychological environments in which they are told.

The Discourse on Disaster

We may now attempt to apply aspects of our perspective to the discussion of a particular corpus of jokes, those riddle-jokes that emerged shortly after the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger on 28 January 1986. The jokes spread rapidly throughout the United States and for the most part are well known:

What does NASA stand for?
Need another seven astronauts.

Where are the astronauts spending their next vacation?
All over Florida.

What color were Christa McAuliffe's eyes?
Blue. One blew this way and one blew that way.

Why didn't they put showers aboard the Challenger?
Because they knew everyone would wash up on shore.

How did they know that Christa McAuliffe had dandruff?
Her head and shoulders washed up on shore.

How do we know that Christa McAuliffe wasn't a good teacher?
Good teachers don't blow up in front of their class.
[Alternately: how do we know she was a good teacher?
She only blew up once.]

What's worse than glass in baby food?
Astronauts in tuna.

What were Christa McAuliffe's last words to her husband?
You feed the kids, I'll feed the fish.

What were Christa McAuliffe's last words?
What's this red button for?

What do sharks eat at Cape Canaveral?
Launch meat.

What was the last thing to go through Christa McAuliffe's mind?
A piece of fuselage. [Alternately: her ass.]

What was the cause of the Challenger explosion?
The crew was freebasing Tang on the mid-deck.

What were the last words said on the Challenger?
I want a light. . . . No, no—a Bud Light.

Why do they drink Coke at NASA?
They can't get 7-Up.

Within a month of the disaster, the existence of the joke cycle was acknowledged in the press. The opinion of Roger Simon, writing in the *Los Angeles Times,* is quoted at length:

> A friend from New York called me to ask if I heard the latest Christa McAuliffe jokes. . . .
> My friend's call did not shock me because I had already heard the jokes. Some jokes involved just McAuliffe, and others involved the death of all seven astronauts. . . .
> Let me disappoint you right now if you expect me to reprint these jokes. I am not going to do it. If you have never heard these jokes, count yourself lucky.
> A colleague here at the paper has a whole list of the jokes. They had upset him greatly, and newsmen are very hard to upset. Bleak, sardonic humor is common to newsrooms. These jokes, however, went beyond that.

"How could people joke about a thing like this?" he asked.

But people will joke about anything. Maybe that's the point. Maybe it is some people's way of saying that nothing is sacred. . . .

True, almost all jokes are based on someone else's misfortune. That is the basis for humor. . . .

Take any joke you can think of. Take one of my favorite comic, Henny Youngman: "Doctor gave a guy six months to live. Guy couldn't pay the bill; doctor gave him another six months!"

Why is that joke funny? Why is it not cruel? Because the object of the jokes is not real. We can joke about a guy having six months to live, because there is no such guy. It is harmless, anonymous joking. . . .

The McAuliffe jokes are different, however. In them, the targets and the tragedy are only too real. Psychologists I have talked to tell me that is the point. They say we joke about the truly horrible as a way of distancing ourselves from it, as a way of isolating ourselves from tragedy. By joking about it, we make it unreal.

Well, maybe. But maybe we joke about such things for a different reason. Maybe we do it to satisfy some, deep, dark urge within us to speak the unspeakable, to push against the limits of decency. . . .

I am not sure who makes these jokes up. I am not sure why they do it. I am not sure how they get the jokes spread around the country so fast.

I'm only really sure of one thing.

They are not doing it to be funny. [1986:11]

There are undoubtedly many individuals in the United States who, like Simon, would attribute the Challenger jokes to human depravity. However, scholars and physicians are inclined to be more forgiving: "They help people cope with anxieties," stated psychologist Harvey Mindess. Psychiatrist William F. Fry agreed: the jokes are a way "of trying to cope with the horror." "TV and perhaps the newspapers make everyone a witness," opined folklorist Alan Dundes. "We all saw those smiling people getting aboard—including one of *us,* a civilian. . . . We all share and we share immediately. . . . The more horrible things are the more you need these things" (Emmons 1986:1, 26). "People who were sensitive to the disaster can find some need later to distance themselves from it and to joke about it" (Smyth 1986:257).

Neither the depraved nor the therapeutic hypothesis depend upon a close reading of the jokes themselves. Both positions are equally based upon the fact that people are laughing at horrific disaster. It seems solely a matter of formulating an opinion as to the motives that inform that laughter—cruel and depraved or therapeutic and liberating? But as with the discussion about the businessman and his secretaries, there are other possibilities.

Simon has characterized the Challenger jokes as tasteless and cruel. It may be worthwhile to examine the specific properties of these jokes that excited Simon's commentary. The jokes are not all of one piece. In the first place there are several jokes that conjoin NASA with images of death and failure. In one sense they are simply recognizing that the privileged place held by the Space Administration in American consciousness was compromised. NASA was presented as one of the few American bureaucracies that worked—that got the job done. The jokes suggest that NASA was no longer unique among bureau-

cratic institutions. Although such jokes *may* be used as a criticism of NASA, such criticism is not necessarily implied by the jokes.

Many tellers of these jokes were strongly committed to NASA's mission and want to see it continue. They are unhappy about the lengthy delays in the shuttle program as a result of the disaster. They have always felt that the conquest of space was an enterprise that would exact a toll in human life. But somehow the very lethal potentials of space flight had been divorced from the public consciousness about NASA's mission. And this, in fact, is precisely what these jokes assert: that death or failure is inevitably conjoined with NASA's space effort. Whether the jokes serve as criticism of NASA will in large part depend upon an individual's sense of the worth of the space mission and the extent to which the risks were and are subject to human control.

Most of the Challenger jokes do not mention NASA, however, but trade on responding to seemingly innocuous questions with graphic images of death and dismemberment. These incongruous images are made appropriate and hence humorous by several techniques, but usually those of double meaning (e.g., "head and shoulders," "blue," "blew up," "wash up," "go through," "I'll feed"). Certainly these graphic images are a major contributor to the "tastelessness" of the Challenger jokes.

It would seem to me that there are alternative hypotheses beyond cruelty or working through the horror of the tragedy to account for these formulations. Indeed, Simon articulates one hypothesis very well: it centers on his notions of "decency" and "unspeakability."

Jokes are forms par excellence that deal with situations of unspeakability, because they may conjoin an unspeakable, and hence incongruous, universe of discourse to a speakable one. This is not necessarily the joke's raison d'être, but it certainly is one of the joke's unique talents.

Without imputing any malevolence to newspeople, it should be recognized that public disasters are media triumphs. They are what make the news. Indeed, our awareness of national or international disasters is dependent upon the media—particularly television news broadcasting. Furthermore, the frame for communication of information about a disaster is established by the media. In doing so, they establish canons of speakability and unspeakability (or viewability and unviewability). Graphic images of death and bodily mutilation are generally beyond speakability or viewability. When they do make their appearance, they are usually preceded by explicit warnings and/or apologies.

The shuttle disaster was a photojournalistic coup. It happened "live on TV" and could be replayed countless times to viewing audiences. It could be replayed not only because it had been captured on magnetic tape, but because the view of that human disaster miles above the earth was shielded by flame and the opaque wall of the shuttle cabin. These images of the disaster were not only decided to be "speakable" but endlessly repeatable, and viewers were bombarded with images of launch and explosion again and again. But beyond these speakable images of flame and falling debris lay the imaginable but un-

speakable images of horrific trauma and mutilation. The "abstract" incendiary images of television news belied the "concrete" destruction of human muscle, bone, brain, and being. But this level of destruction was unspeakable and indecent, and hence unacknowledged. The jokes, however, call this unspeakable destruction to our attention and force us to confront what lies behind the speakable media images that are created or manipulated for our consumption.

It is worth pointing out that in the jokes these images of destruction often are responses to some innocuous question about details: What was Christa McAuliffe's eye color? What were her last words? What was the last thing said on board the shuttle? Why were there no showers aboard the shuttle? These are precisely the kinds of questions that are regularly entertained by television newscasters and commentators. They do attend to details of description such as eye color (especially when describing a young female in the fullness of life whom a misfortune has befallen). They are passionately concerned with "last words" uttered or last deeds done before death. They have been particularly attentive to the last words preceding air disasters that are preserved on flight recorders. These last words are usually played for their "human interest" value rather than for what they may contribute to an understanding of the accident. (One recent example was the playing of the flight recorder from the Mexicana flight that collided with a small plane over Cerritos on its approach to Los Angeles International Airport. When the pilot's very last words were finally released over the airwaves, they were broadcast with his final expletive deleted. This brings us back once again to the issue of unspeakability, as the last words of this doomed man became unspeakable according to some public code of acceptability.) Even the question "Why didn't they put showers aboard the shuttle?" seems to echo the questions of the news commentators that immediately followed the disaster as to why there were no escape hatches put aboard the craft.

Another of Simon's complaints about the Challenger jokes was their lack of anonymity. Jokes about death and dying are all right so long as they are anonymous. "The targets and the tragedy are only too real," said Simon of the Challenger jokes. Who were these tragic heroes of the ill-fated Challenger mission? To family and friends they were persons intimately woven into the fabric of their lives. The loss to loved ones could have been no less great or wrenching had they been killed in an automobile accident or a plane crash. But in the media, the distinction between a private, personal loss and a public, symbolic one was rarely kept in view. Although many people were genuinely moved by the shuttle disaster, the shuttle crew members had not been woven into the fabric of their lives. Their sense of loss, if any, could not be enduring. For the shuttle crew were not persons—only media personalities. Indeed, only Christa McAuliffe is mentioned by name in the shuttle jokes. The other names have quickly faded into the generic "other astronauts." Indeed, at this late date, it would be difficult to ascertain how many of the public even knew there were seven astronauts until after the disaster occured. While the prominence of

Christa McAuliffe might bear several interpretations (Simons 1986), the most economical one is that her unique status as a nonastronaut attracted significant media attention. More to the point, it is no exaggeration to claim that her presence abroad the space shuttle was purely symbolic—that is, she was there solely to give the media something to report. In fact, the joke, "What were Christa McAuliffe's last words?" "What's this red button for?" clearly articulates the teller's and listener's shared understanding of Christa McAuliffe's superfluousness to the technical and scientific mission of the Challenger.

Again, it was the media that attempted to prescribe the significance of the shuttle disaster for its viewing audience. Their insistent rhetoric of tragedy, grief, and mourning might well have been regarded as an affront and intrusion by a viewing public who felt that they were perfectly capable of determining their own emotional responses to the event. It was perhaps inevitable that a rebellion against such media homiletics might surface, and humor was the strategy of that rebellion.

I find it interesting, and perhaps significant, that a number of the shuttle jokes (as well as other disaster jokes) incongruously employ the names of familiar and amiable commercial products from television advertising: Coke, Seven-Up, Tang, Head and Shoulders, Bud Light. "What were the last words said on the Challenger?" "I want a light . . . no, no—a Bud Light." In this joke an incongruous image is created of the Challenger destruction being caused by someone mistaking an order for beer as a request for an explosion. The incongruity is appropriate because incendiaries are indeed part and parcel of Budweiser Light Beer commercials. This linking of the Challenger disaster with television commercials does not seem entirely coincidental. The juxtaposition of commercial products with images of disaster seems a particularly apt commentary on the television medium and the images it presents to viewers at home. Television news programs regularly conjoin images and stories of death, disease, and destruction with images of commercial products. Virtually every television report of a news disaster is preceded and followed by a commercial message (or each and every commercial message is preceded and followed by a report of a disaster). Thus the concatenation of brand name products and images of disaster achieved in the jokes is really no more incongruous than that achieved several times each evening by national and local television news programs (Smyth 1986:259).

I do not mean to argue that these jokes need to be viewed as a conscious and deliberate assault on the press (von Hoffman 1986). Rather, the jokes may be viewed as a rebellion against a world defined by the media. Much of the world that we have come to know and about which we worry is a media construction. Were it not for the media, our disasters would be far fewer. In part, Challenger jokes challenge this media definition of the world. They are part of a battle for the control of discourse about death and disaster. Indeed, it is appropriate that Roger Simon should be so puzzled by the Challenger joke phenomenon, for it is against such desires as his to define tragedy and control feelings

that the jokes are so militantly and pervasively arrayed. It is even more appropriate that the humor takes such an outrageous form: because this outrageousness guarantees that the media will prove unable to report the humor in any detail. Against an all-consuming and expropriating media, these "tasteless" jokes are a form of discourse that cannot be readily co-opted.

This is clearly not the only interpretation that has been or could be proposed. But this interpretation is more than a statement about why people would joke about disaster. Interpretations that intimate deep, dark, and cruel motives or those that regard the jokes as ways of coping with horror need not (and often do not) attend to the details of the jokes themselves. Furthermore, their depth analyses of human psyches are usually accomplished without any reference to individual human beings, either depraved or grieving. As such, their interpretive efforts seem somewhat a priori. If jokes seem cruel or horrible, then the people telling them are either cruel or they are simply coping with a horrifying situation. Both of these propositions are crude reductions of Freud's psychology of joking.

Ironically, my own interpretation, in its effort to avoid any adherence to Freud's psychological propositions, is probably more faithful to Freud's rich and subtle psychology. It was Freud who pointed to the significant similarities and dissimilarities between jokes and dreams. Among the most important dissimilarities is that dreams are unintelligible and the inhibitions that motivate them are unconscious. Jokes, on the other hand, are *communications* and have a requisite condition of intelligibility. The inhibitions that motivate jokes are accessible to consciousness, and indeed, are highlighted by the joke itself (Freud 1960:173–180). People who tell disaster jokes know that one is not *supposed* to talk about human suffering and disaster graphically or flippantly. Indeed, the joketellers and their critics share the very same sensitivities; but the joketellers are willing to ritually suspend these sensitivities when they are elevated by others to the level of moral imperatives. This is not a depth analysis of jokes; it proceeds from an understanding of inhibitions and forces that we all recognize and share.

It may be worthwhile to reexamine some of the reported American joke cycles from such a perspective. It may be that Auschwitz jokes (Dundes and Hauschild 1983), ethnic jokes (Dundes 1971), dead baby jokes (Dundes 1979), AIDS jokes (Dundes 1987), as well as other disaster cycles may also be reactions to the conventionalization of discourse. It would seem that the "What's Grosser than Gross?" metajokelore cycle acknowledges the enlarged boundaries of discourse created by sick jokes themselves (Bronner 1985). It is certainly not my intention to reduce the discussion of jokes to platitudes about the media or public proprieties, but it may be worthwhile to explore such suggestions as well as the deeper psychological hypotheses.

The newspaperwoman did go on to write her article about the use of jokes as a form of sexual harassment in the workplace. She even included the joke I told her about the "big tits," although as a responsible reporter she felt com-

pelled to call them "big breasts." But something that I said to her about jokes must have shaken her faith in the simplicity of jokes and the transparency of their intentions, because when the article finally did appear it was entitled: "The joke's on you—or is it?" (Kasdan 1986).

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