A dissertation presented to

the faculty of

the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Matthew R. Turner

June 2005
This dissertation entitled

SIGNS OF COMEDY: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO COMEDY IN THE ARTS

BY

MATTHEW R. TURNER

has been approved for

the School of Interdisciplinary Arts

and the College of Fine Arts by

Keith Harris

Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts

Raymond Tymas-Jones

Dean, College of Fine Arts
Comedy is a mode of discourse that operates across many different genres, media, and styles. Just as there are comic films, there are comic plays, music, paintings, sculptures, and photographs. Comedy has its own aesthetic that is distinct from, but invariably related to, tragedy. It is as central to the human condition as any other aspect of human life, yet the amount of serious academic study it has received is relatively small. One of the advantages of using semiotics as a methodology for studying comedy is that it is versatile and interdisciplinary enough to explain how comedic meaning is created in a variety of art forms. This dissertation attempts to develop a semiotic theory of comedy by reconciling existing comedic theories with semiotic theory and to explore the nature of comedic meaning as a corruption, reversal, or undermining of conventional semiotic meaning. This theory is used to analyze various artworks to show how a semiotic analysis of the comedy in those works can be used to understand not only how the works produce comedy, but to provide insight into the nature of comedy itself. While this dissertation addresses comedy in a variety of art forms that have typically been under-represented in semiotic scholarship, it also pays specific attention to film, which is ideally suited to an interdisciplinary study of comedy. Comic film is inherently interdisciplinary, often includes verbal or linguistic humor, frequently has a comedic narrative structure, can include comedic music, and is a visual medium that has the most highly-developed forms of visual
comedy. It is fertile ground for examining how comedy can function on a variety of levels and in a variety of formats. Because a semiotic approach to comedy has received limited attention in English-language discourse and a semiotic approach to comedy has not been fully integrated as a theoretical approach, this work opens a new avenue of study. It expands not only the field of semiotics, but also provides an alternative method for understanding why and how comedy functions in a variety of art forms, specifically addressing comedy as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Approved:

Keith Harris

Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wife, April, for everything she does, or more accurately for doing everything. This includes countless hours of proofreading and managing everything in my life except for the actual writing of this dissertation.

This work is also dedicated to my daughters, Alexis and Mercy, for teaching me that we first have to experience the tragedy of life before we can laugh at its comedy.
Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank Dr. and Mrs. Billman for funding and the College of Fine Arts Selection Committee for awarding me the I. Hollis Parry/Ann Parry Billman Fine Arts Award without which I would not have been able to accomplish critical research for this work in the film archives in Rome and Bologna. I would also like to thank Dr. Giovanni Manetti of the University of Siena for his valuable advice feedback and access to his work. The faculty and staff of the School of Interdisciplinary Arts, individually and collectively, also deserve my heartfelt thanks for the incalculable help, both with this and other projects, and for serving as mentors, colleagues, and friends.
Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. iv
Dedication ............................................................................................................. vi
Acknowledgments ................................................................................................. vii
List of Figures ....................................................................................................... 4

Introduction - “Who’s on First?” .......................................................................... 5
  Defining the Terms ............................................................................................... 6
  Semiotics .............................................................................................................. 14
  Significance ......................................................................................................... 16
  Chapters ............................................................................................................... 19
  The End of the Beginning .................................................................................... 24

Chapter 1: Laughing at Others’ Misfortunes - The Aesthetic Origins of Comedy and its
  Emergence from Tragedy ...................................................................................... 27
  Origins .................................................................................................................. 28
  The Philosophical Comic Tradition in Ancient Greece ........................................ 36
  Old and New Comedy .......................................................................................... 51
  Modern Philosophical Theories of Comedy ........................................................ 56
  Relief Theory ...................................................................................................... 57
  Superiority Theory .............................................................................................. 58
  Incongruity Theory ............................................................................................. 60
  Arthur Schopenhauer ........................................................................................... 64
  Henri Bergson ...................................................................................................... 67
  The Ludicrous and the Mechanical ..................................................................... 73
  Tragedy and Comedy .......................................................................................... 81
  The Comic Aesthetic ........................................................................................... 87

Chapter 2: Is it a Semi-Automatic or Manual Semiotic? - A Review and Development of
  Semiotic Approaches to Comedy ........................................................................ 89
  The Sign in History .............................................................................................. 90
  Peirce, Saussure and Modern Semiotics ............................................................. 92
  Conditions of Comedy ......................................................................................... 98
  Cognitive Climate ............................................................................................... 98
  Emotional Climate .............................................................................................. 100
  Semiotic Comedians ......................................................................................... 102
  North American Scholarship .............................................................................. 104
  Italian Scholarship ............................................................................................ 108
  Isotopy ............................................................................................................... 116
Chapter 3: I am the Very Model of a Semiotical Analysis - The Pirates of Penzance and Linguistic and Narrative Semiotic Humor ......................................................... 154
Playing with Words .................................................. 155
Semiotics and Theater ................................................ 167
Working with the Text ................................................ 170
Adding to the Text ..................................................... 171
Working Against the Text .......................................... 173
Incongruity of Situation ............................................. 175
Musical Comedy ....................................................... 179
Narrative Structure .................................................. 181
Comedy and Narrative .............................................. 184
The Pirates of Penzance as a Comic Narrative ............... 187

Chapter 4: - How Many Surrealists Does it Take to Screw in a Lightbulb? - Visual Humor in the Visual Arts ................................................................. 194
Visual Encoding ....................................................... 199
Connotation ............................................................ 201
Visual Competence .................................................. 202
Visual Humor .......................................................... 204
Dada, Surrealism, and Comedy ................................... 205
Elliott Erwitt and the Comic Photograph ...................... 219
Visual Narrative ..................................................... 220
Indexical Visual Comedy .......................................... 223
Visual Incongruity .................................................. 225
Visual Parallelism .................................................... 226
List of Figures

Figure 1: Rene Magritte Treachery of Images ............................................. 346
Figure 2: Rene Magritte Collective Invention ............................................. 346
Figure 3: Rene Magritte The Lost Jockey .................................................. 347
Figure 4: Rene Magritte The Castle in the Pyrenees ................................ 347
Figure 5: Rene Magritte Golconda .......................................................... 348
Figure 6: Rene Magritte The Blaze ......................................................... 348
Figure 7: Marcel Duchamp L.H.O.O.Q ..................................................... 349
Figure 8: Man Ray Violon d’Ingres ......................................................... 349
Figure 9: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres The Turkish Bath .................... 350
Figure 10: Elliott Erwitt Albany, New York, 1962 ..................................... 350
Figure 11: Elliott Erwitt Saint Tropez, 1979 ............................................. 351
Figure 12: Elliott Erwitt Cannes, 1975 .................................................... 351
Figure 13: Elliott Erwitt Teheran, Iran, 1967 ............................................ 352
Figure 14: Elliott Erwitt Amsterdam, Holland 1972 .............................. 352
Figure 15: Elliott Erwitt Mount Fuji, Japan, 1977 .................................... 353
Figure 16: Elliott Erwitt New Orleans, U.S.A., 1970 ............................. 353
Figure 17: Elliott Erwitt Saint Tropez, 1968 ............................................. 354
Figure 18: Elliott Erwitt Saintes Maries de la Mer, France, 1977 ............... 354
Figure 19: Elliott Erwitt New York City, 1975 ....................................... 355
Figure 20: Elliott Erwitt Nice, 1968 ....................................................... 355
Figure 21: Elliott Erwitt Florida Keys, 1968 ........................................... 356
Figure 22: Elliott Erwitt Venice, California, 1976 .................................... 356
Figure 23: Elliott Erwitt San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1978 ............................ 357
Figure 24: Elliott Erwitt New York City, 1949 ....................................... 357
Figure 25: Elliott Erwitt New York City, 1974 ....................................... 358
Figure 26: Elliott Erwitt Hungary, 1964 ............................................... 358
Figure 27: Elliott Erwitt Santa Cruz, U.S.A., 1975 .................................. 359
Figure 28: Elliott Erwitt Huntsville, Alabama, 1974 ............................... 359
Figure 29: Hector meets weeping damsels, in combat with Tercians ........... 360
Figure 30: Perceval and the beautiful damsel on her ship ....................... 361
“For, look you, there is humour in all things, and the truest philosophy is that which teaches us to find it and to make the most of it.”

- Sir William S. Gilbert (Gilbert and Sullivan 408)

Introduction - “Who’s on First?”

Comedy is a mode of discourse that operates across many different genres, media, and styles. Just as there are comic films, there are also comic operas, music, plays, paintings, sculptures, photographs, and a variety of other art forms. Comedy has its own aesthetic that is distinct from, but invariably related to, tragedy. It is as central to the human condition as any other aspect of human life, yet the amount of serious academic study it has received in comparison to tragedy tends to make it dwindle into comparative insignificance. Perhaps the inherent incongruity of the idea of a serious study of the comic causes scholars to ignore its significance. It is also problematic in that it seems that anyone who undertakes the effort to write seriously about comedy is almost immediately forced to justify that undertaking. There is a danger that such an endeavor will seem less like a herculean labor and appear more like a quixotic adventure. Perhaps that is because there is some truth in both of those incongruous viewpoints.

Even though the field is relatively small, there are a number of reasons that have been put forth to justify the study of comedy. Some, including Freud and his followers, believe that comedy allows us to release tension and deal with the dangers and stresses in the world. Others have argued that because of the pleasurable nature of comedy it may “fulfill a role in promoting the acquisition of cognitive skills” (Kreitler, Drechsler, and
There is also a vicarious pleasure in subverting or ignoring the rules that normally constrain our behavior and beliefs. Umberto Eco suggests that through comedy “we can allow ourselves the vicarious pleasure of a transgression that offends a rule we have secretly wanted to violate, but without risk” (Travels 270-1). Another possible purpose for comedy is that we find it interesting as a mental exercise. William Paul suggests that there is as much pleasure in understanding a joke as there is in interpreting the richest of metaphors (69). Henri Bergson argues that laughter is a kind of social corrective, illuminating yet another possible purpose of comedy. Another reason to study comedy is that it is entertaining or it just makes us feel good. This idea gets a little closer to the way that we will be examining comedy within the context of this work: namely, that comedy will be considered primarily as an aesthetic phenomenon. Morreall suggests, “Our enjoyment of a good deal of humor, I shall argue, is a kind of aesthetic experience, and as such is equal in value to any other kind of aesthetic experience. Perhaps the most basic characteristic shared by humor and aesthetic experience generally is that both have intrinsic value for us” (Seriously 89). As an exploration of the arts, this study must necessarily deal with comedy in its aesthetic character. It will attempt to address, at least on some level, how the use of comedy contributes to our aesthetic enjoyment of an artwork and is, in fact part of the overall aesthetic experience.

**Defining the Terms**

I feel that I am in danger here of getting myself into a situation much like the conversation between Groucho and Chico Marx during their contract negotiation in *A Night at the Opera*. Groucho reading the contract to Chico says “the party of the first part
shall be known in this contract as the party of the first part” (qtd. in Anobile 201). When they get to the “party of the second part” Chico says he does not like the second party, whereupon Groucho replies “Well, you should have come to the first party. We didn’t get home till around four in the morning. I was blind for three days” (qtd. in Anobile 203). Similarly, dealing with the terms surrounding comedy can be a confusingly illogical process. Definitions are often assumed by the authors of various works or, even worse, defined in terms of themselves. Also, just as with Groucho and Chico, sometimes authors use the same word to mean two or more very different things. Comedy, comic, comedic, humor, amusement, satire, parody, irony, absurdity, nonsense, sarcasm, wit, jokes, funny, and laughter are all generally grouped around the concept of the comic. Most of the sources that I will be examining have their own definitions of these terms, some very distinctly separated, and others that are not so clearly delineated and overlap each other.

For the most part, I will be using the concept of comedy and the terms comedy and humor in their most general senses, or what Attardo describes as an “all-encompassing category” (4). Generally, my own usage of the words comic, comedic, and humorous will be largely interchangeable, although I will make some effort to point out more specific usages of these terms by some of the sources that I will use. Even though there is value in using this general concept there are also nuanced meanings that enable us to better understand a particular concept or phrase. For instance, Grawe’s distinction between the “comedic” as a form of art and the “comic” as something created to make us laugh can be useful in our analysis of a comic work (8). While I will at some points look at comedy as a literary and historical form, for the most part I am dealing with the wider idea of what is
funny, in all the myriads of forms and manners that that concept can be felt and expressed. This is an amorphous definition at best and is a continuing problem in writing about comedy. Eco states, “From antiquity to Freud or Bergson, every attempt to define comic seems to be jeopardized by the fact that this is an umbrella term [. . .] that gathers together a disturbing ensemble of diverse and not completely homogeneous phenomena” (“Frames” 1). Comedy is something that most people seem to recognize, but that cannot be easily described.

Before I delve too deeply into the specific details defining some of our terms, it is useful to establish some of the boundaries of the discussion of comedy within this study. First, it is necessary to distinguish comedy, as an aesthetic experience or a mode of discourse, and the phenomenon of laughter. Historically, these two concepts have been frequently conflated by philosophers and scholars, despite their diametrically opposed positions in relation to each other, namely, stimulus and response. Attardo addresses what he sees is the origin of this problem:

The assumption behind this identification of humor and laughter is that what makes people laugh is humorous, and hence the property is incorrectly seen as symmetrical—what is funny makes you laugh and what makes you laugh is funny. This leads to the identification of a mental phenomenon (humor) with a complex neuro-physiological manifestation (laughter). (10)

There are numerous conditions that can elicit laughter that are unrelated to comedy, even though laughter is the most common response to comedy. In general, I will try not to get
too involved with the physiological and psychological processes involved as a result of or reaction to comedy. While there is undeniably an important neurological process that goes on in the human mind in order to experience or appreciate comedy as an aesthetic phenomenon, in terms of understanding what specifically makes something funny, I will primarily be dealing with the mechanics of construction and organization of the ways in which humor is created through the undermining of conventional semiotic meaning. That is to say, I will be concentrating more on what makes something comical from a structural viewpoint and will essentially ignore the issue of whether or not a person would actually be amused by it. Again, while I wish to focus on the stimulus side of this equation, I will be forced from time to time to deal with the response side, if for no other reason than many of the works I will be examining have dealt with the issue. Related to this idea, I will not typically be considering humorous accidents or slips of the tongue except as they are incorporated into comedic works for aesthetic humorous purposes.

Another issue that we confront is that the meaning of these words and the concepts of comedy and humor have changed over time. Additionally, we are dealing with words that have changed their meaning over time. For example “comedy” in the original Greek meant “reveling song” (Altman 51) and “humorous” is a Latin word which described the various humors or fluids in the body that controlled our temperament (Funk 16-17). Another aspect of this problem is that the way people view comedy based on their social and political environments and the times and places in which they have lived also have changed. Smith touches on this problem when he states:

The universalizing power of humor, which some critics consider the highest
attribute of comedy, is not implicit in the comic nor in comedy. Humor, in the limited, modern sense in which we are here using it, is entirely absent in Greek comedy. The Greeks would have been utterly at a loss to understand what we mean by ‘the richer laugh of heart and mind in one.’

(167)

Certainly we no longer mean precisely the same thing that Aristotle did when he defined comedy in his Poetics as “an imitation of people who are worse than the average. Their badness, however, is not of every kind. The ridiculous, rather, is a species of the ugly; it may be defined as a mistake or unseemliness that is not painful or destructive” (qtd. in Morreall, Philosophy 14).

Some specific types of comedy that will be dealt with in more detail in later chapters, deserve some particular mention. It is important, however, to realize that some of these terms coexist or overlap each other. They can sometimes appear in isolation, but they can also be working in conjunction with many of the other types of comedy. Northrop Frye paints a verbal picture of the comic mode as a sort of continuum or spectrum with irony and satire on one end and romance on the other (177). This is a useful way of viewing the phenomenon of comedy. Although we will be dealing with some fairly specific definitions, other categories sometimes share the same or similar characteristics. The following is by no means an exhaustive list, but merely introduces some of the terms that will be of most use to us in this discussion.

Because irony forms one of the boundaries of Frye’s definition of comedy and because of its use in situations that are not necessarily comic, it is a good starting point.
Irony is somewhat problematic in terms of comedy since it is often as associated with the tragic or serious as it is with the comic. Frye states, “Hence satire is irony which is structurally close to the comic: the comic struggle of two societies, one normal and the other absurd, is reflected in its double focus of morality and fantasy. Irony with little satire is the non-heroic residue of tragedy, centering on a theme of puzzled defeat” (224).

Irony, in its most basic sense is saying or indicating one thing while really meaning another. While irony has tragic potential (think of the irony inherent in the story of Oedipus for example), we will see that it can also be associated with comedy because of its incongruous structure. This idea and some of the specifics of what makes it read comically in one sense and tragically in another will be discussed in greater detail in chapter two.

Satire has received considerable attention as a literary form and mode of discourse. As a literary form, modern satire is a descendent of the Satyr plays that followed the trilogies presented in Ancient Greek tragedies. Although only one complete Satyr play is known to exist, it is generally accepted that the Satyr play would comment on, in a humorous way, the preceding three installments of the tragedy. The connection between tragedy and comedy is something that we will be exploring in some depth in chapter one and again in chapter seven. In speaking of satire as a literary mode, Frye states, “Two things, then, are essential to satire; one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack. Attack without humor, or pure denunciation, forms one of the boundaries of satire” (Frye 224). Because satire has a purpose, generally to expose some folly or fault in the object of derision, it is sometimes
quite serious in its import. For the most part, we will not be using the more strict sense of satire as a literary form, but the more general form of mocking some convention or idea to expose the problems inherent in it. Our working definition of satire will be the incongruity between the actual and what should be. Incongruity will be developed in detail in chapter one and then the relationship between incongruity and satire will be addressed in chapter two. There is a moral or ethical dimension to satire that is inherent in its criticisms and exposures.

Although parody and satire share many characteristics, such as humorously commenting on serious subjects, there is a clear purposive difference between the two. A parody is a comical imitation of something that uses its existing codes to examine the subject in a humorous way. Parody often exists simultaneously in conjunction with satire, but can be distinguished from satire, which is designed more specifically to point out vices, follies, or problems with conventional beliefs. Parody is generally more lighthearted and less critical in nature.

Wit is another word that proves rather difficult to pin down specifically. Typically, wit is verbal in nature and is more intellectual, requiring clever and ingenious connections (Martin 75). This is complicated in that wit can be tendentious (to use Freud’s term) or having some object to attack, being satiric, sarcastic, and parodic or it can be non-tendentious, illustrating clever connections between words and ideas that do not have a specific target.

The next category will be termed straight comedy for lack of a better description. In this case, I want to define the parameters a little more carefully for the sake of clarity.
The definition here offered is also problematic in that it overlaps several other areas of comedy. I would like to describe straight comedy as the non-motivated comic. This concept is more of a comedy for comedy’s sake and does not really distinguish between tendentious and non-tendentious comedy per se. This can cover a wide range of comedy, but I would like to distinguish it from something like satire that has a purpose or a commentary to make. While it is highly doubtful that such a form of comedy, abstracted from the real world, exists in a pure form, it is a useful concept to include in terms of studying comedy as a purely aesthetic phenomenon. This category could include things like slapstick, jokes, farce, or anything that is primarily intended to entertain or be funny without necessarily needing to provide some critique or make some comment.

When we arrive at the other end of the spectrum of comedy that Frye envisions, we find romance or romantic comedy. This category is closer in some ways to one of the strongest traditional definitions of comedy originating with the Greek New Comedy. This is the lighthearted story, often with funny moments, but one that almost inevitably ends with a wedding. This is placed in opposition to tragedy where we typically have the tragic death of the hero or those that he loves. A romantic comedy on the other hand, reasserts the importance of life and reaffirms the existing social structure. A wedding means that society is continuing to bind itself in felicitous and optimistic ways and portends the birth of a new generation. Obviously, the traditional title of comedy for this specific brand of story is far too narrow for general use. It excludes things such as dark comedy, satires, or any of the highly destructive and subversive forms of comedy that we will be dealing with in this study. In fact, it is the very subversive nature of comedy that will be of central
importance to us as we try to discover how comedy can be understood as a signifying or semiotic practice.

**Semiotics**

One of the great advantages of using semiotics as a methodology for studying comedy is that it is, in itself, versatile and interdisciplinary enough to explain how comedic meaning is created in a variety of media and art forms. Through careful examination of general semiotic theory and the semiotic writings that specifically address comedy, I will attempt to further develop a general semiotic theory of comedy. Despite the attempts that have been made to examine comedy as a semiotic phenomenon, there is still no general semiotic theory of comedy. One of the problems is that most of the research done in this area is concentrated primarily on linguistic comedy. Attardo’s assumptions about and description of existing semiotic theories of comedy show some of the limitations of the field so far.

There are many problems confronting the establishment of a coherent semiotic theory, but insofar as it can parallel a linguistic theory, it is easy to match step by step the problems that are analyzed in the linguistics of humor with those of a semiotics of humor. To be sure, there are problems that are peculiar to the visual domain, to name only one. (Attardo 194)

Here Attardo explains how most of the research in this area has followed linguistic forms. The problem, of course, is that we have comedy appearing in visual arts, film, music, dance and a variety of other sources. Jakobson, in discussing semiotics as a general topic, describes how semiotics can and should reach across the arts.
The problems of baroque or any other historical style transgress the frame of a single art. When handling the surrealistic metaphor, we could hardly pass by Max Ernst’s pictures or Luis Bunuel’s films, *The Andalusian Dog* and *The Golden Age*. In short, many poetic features belong not only to the science of language but to the whole theory of signs, that is, to general semiotics. This statement, however, is valid not only for verbal art but also for all varieties of language since language shares many properties with some other systems of signs or even with all of them (pansemiotic features). (qtd. in Eco, “Jacobson” 116-7)

This work proposes to explore some of these pansemiotic features and how they can be used to describe and understand comedy and to further demonstrate how semiotic theory can be successfully applied to analyze comedy in a wide variety of art forms. By studying the comic elements of a variety of comic artworks, existing theories of comedy can be critiqued and developed in a way that supports the formulation of a general semiotic theory of comedy in the arts.

Any study of comedy in the arts must invariably deal with the question of aesthetics, which plays an important role in understanding how humor functions across art forms. There is a relatively small but significant body of philosophical writings dealing with comedy and aesthetics. Many theories of comedy have been proposed over the years, including the incongruity theory, the superiority theory, and the relief theory. The incongruity theory suggests that humor is found in the tension between the perceived and the conceived, or the expected and actual. The superiority theory claims that humor is
created by observing and feeling superior to others because of their faults or imperfections. The relief theory is based on the idea that humor and laughter allow us to release pent up emotions and stress. These theories will be described in more depth in chapter one.

Significance

It is no accident that the word “sign” appears in significance, yet the semiotics or the study of signs and how it relates to comedy is a topic that has received relatively little attention. Most modern research seems to be largely unaware of the work that has been done in semiotics or the potential semiotics has to help in the understanding of comedy. Attardo describes the current state of comedic research:

[C]ontributions to humor research are widely diversified and range over a variety of disciplines, including (but not limited to) psychology, anthropology, sociology, literature, medicine, philosophy, philology, mathematics, education, semiotics, and linguistics. It is widely recognized that humor research is an interdisciplinary field and that its central problems are better understood if one takes into account diverse contributions that come from a variety of fields and subfields. (Attardo 15)

Although Attardo includes semiotics as one of the many disciplines that address comedy, I would argue that semiotics is inherently interdisciplinary. Morris stated: “Semiotic has for its goal a general theory of signs in all their forms and manifestations, whether in animals or men, whether normal or pathological, whether linguistic or nonlinguistic, whether personal or social. Semiotic [sic.] is thus an interdisciplinary enterprise” (qtd. in Nöth 49).
One of the central goals of this project is to demonstrate the enormous potential that semiotics as an interdisciplinary methodology has to help us understand how comedy works in a variety of manifestations.

One of the other major purposes of this study is to make available the work of European semioticians to an English speaking audience. Attardo has done a remarkable job of summarizing much of the research that has been done by European semioticians in his *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, but semiotics and how it can be applied to the arts is somewhat peripheral to his purposes. Beyond Attardo’s work, there is little evidence that English language scholarship on semiotics and comedy has any significant awareness of the work of European scholars on the topic. The reverse is not true. European scholars routinely cite the work being done on semiotics and comedy in journals such as *Semiotica*. My purpose in introducing this scholarship is twofold. First, there is a significant amount of useful work in this area that should be considered by English language scholarship, and second, I believe that some of the most interesting work on comedy and semiotics has come out of European scholarship. For the purposes of this study, I will concentrate primarily on the work being done in Italy, but will also use some French scholarship in this area.

While I am addressing comedy in a variety of art forms that have typically been under-represented in semiotic scholarship (which I believe is an important endeavor in itself), I will also be paying a significant amount of attention to film. Film is, in many ways, ideally suited for an interdisciplinary study of comedy since film is such an interdisciplinary medium. Comic film often includes verbal or linguistic humor, frequently
has a comedic narrative structure, can include comedic music, and is a visual medium that has perhaps the most highly-developed forms of visual comedy of any art form. In short, it is a fertile ground for examining how comedy can function on a variety of levels and in a variety of formats.

Unfortunately, this project has to stop somewhat short of a more universal semiotic theory of comedy. Because of the various constraints of time and space and decisions that have to be made in terms of focus there will be several glaring omissions and others that are less obvious. One of the subjects that we will unfortunately only touch on, without developing in any great detail, is sculpture. Dance similarly will not be looked at, although there are certainly some parallels that could be drawn between dance and the forms inherent in sculpture and the movement inherent in film and theater. A discussion of the comedic semiotics of music is likewise absent. While this is a topic of great interest, it seems to be such a detailed task and requires such a different set of diagnostic skills for adequate analysis that it will have to wait for another project. Another glaring omission is the lack of significant non-western comedic works. Comedy often involves a very complex cultural knowledge and non-western art forms such as Japanese Rakugo and Kyogen theater can no doubt be profitably studied using a semiotic approach. Semiotics is a useful methodology in this case because it can describe the underlying comedic structures of a subject without necessarily needing to “get the joke.” This topic does however, require more attention and space than can be given here, so this topic will likewise have to wait until another time.
Chapters

Included here is a brief synopsis of each chapter and its major topics.

Chapter 1: Laughing at Others’ Misfortunes - The Aesthetic Origins of Comedy and its Emergence from Tragedy

As a philosophical theory and as a codified mode of discourse, comedy has been around since ancient times. The Western tradition can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. The origins of Greek comedy are somewhat murky due partially to the scant records surviving from the time and partially to the lack of attention it received in written discourse. This is particularly obvious when compared to the amount of material written about tragedy. The concept of Greek comedy is additionally complicated by the fairly specific theatrical forms such as satires, lampoons, and comedies in the Greek world that fall more or less under the modern concept of comedy. What does seem to be clear is that comedy invariably comes after tragedy. Greek comedy established a pattern that would continue to be followed throughout time, indicating the necessity of a serious subject for comedy to comment on. Even at these early stages, the semiotic inversion of traditional meaning is evident. The ancient Greeks seemed to view comedy as an inferior form of art. It not only dealt with inferior people, but it also was not counted as high a form of entertainment as tragedy or epic poetry. Despite this and the lack of solid evidence surrounding the ancient Greeks’ understanding and view of comedy, it is apparent that comedy played an important and necessary role in the ancient world in the same way that it does today and followed certain stylistic and aesthetic tendencies. By studying the writings of Plato and Aristotle, certain ideas and patterns in their thoughts about comedy
begin to emerge. These patterns are by no means clear or monolithic, but they do point out what comedy was and what the ancient Greeks believed it accomplished. This chapter explores the relationship of the comic and the tragic in ancient Greece and points toward what might have been the comic aesthetic in the ancient world. It also problematizes the origins of Western comedy and establishes the role of comedy in the arts.

The chapter then examines the writings of philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Bergson on comedy and describes them in relation to the current divisions of comedic theories that they best exemplify. The relative strengths and weaknesses of these theories are examined with a particular emphasis on their similarities. Although significantly divergent in the analysis and representation of comedy in their philosophical works, Schopenhauer and Bergson share certain ideas on the theory of comedy. Ostensibly, Schopenhauer and Bergson belong to two different schools of philosophical comic theory. While these two theories are essentially non-compatible, they do converge on several interesting points, providing insight into issues such as the purpose of laughter, the relation of the comic to reason, and the origin and function of wit and puns. These competing theories provide additional insight into the complexity of comedy. In particular, the convergence of these two theories on the concept of incongruity is suggested as a particularly fruitful method of studying comedy. Despite these convergences, in some cases, the same comic phenomenon can be described as funny for two very different reasons. Semiotics is introduced as a methodology that can build on these philosophical theories and provide additional insight into the workings of comedy.
Chapter 2: Is it a Semi-Automatic or Manual Semiotic? - A Review and Development of Semiotic Approaches to Comedy

Semiotics as a methodology developed initially in the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce and later developed in the writings of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Many other authors have developed semiotics as a theory and a methodology, notably Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, Thomas Sebeok, and Yuri Lotman. Semiotics has been used in a variety of fields, such as linguistics, literature, film, and communication studies, to explain how meaning is created through signs. Its versatility as a methodology has allowed semiotics to be applied to a variety of media where it is used to describe how signs are used to create meanings specific to that medium. In this chapter the history and general terms of semiotics are introduced with the purpose of grounding the reader in the background and terminology in preparation for the introduction of a semiotic theory of comedy.

In addition, I review the existing literature on semiotic theories of comedy in this chapter. Various theories, many of which do not exist in English translation, are presented and critiqued for their relative strengths and weaknesses. I propose how a semiotic theory of comedy can be applied across the arts in a way that is not bound by traditional linguistic semiotic theories. I make a case for the value of an interdisciplinary approach to studying comedy and how semiotics can be utilized in that attempt.

Chapter 3: I am the Very Model of a Semiotical Analysis - The Pirates of Penzance and Linguistic and Narrative Semiotic Humor

This chapter focuses on Gilbert and Sullivan’s The Pirates of Penzance as a case study illustrating the application of linguistic and narrative theories of semiotic comedy.
Linguistic terminology is presented to describe the process of the creation of jokes, puns, and word play. Semiotic processes are used to describe how the philosophical definitions of these terms function at a linguistic level. In addition, Barthes’ approach to narrative structure will be explored and applied to show how comedic structures function on the narrative level.

Chapter 4: How Many Surrealists Does it Take to Screw in a Lightbulb? - Visual Humor in the Visual Arts

This chapter introduces and develops visual theories of semiotic comedy. Surrealism as a movement and its connections and parallels to comedy and comedic theory are examined. Basic principles of visual semiotic humor are defined and elaborated. A variety of examples including painting and photography including works by Rene Magritte, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and Elliott Erwitt are examined through the lens of semiotic theory.

Chapter 5: “There Ain’t No Sanity Clause” - Comedy and the Transformation of Semiotic Meaning in Marx Brothers Films

There is a significant tradition and body of work involving semiotic analysis of film. To date, however, little has been done to analyze film comedy using semiotic theories of comedy. The Marx Brothers, as masters of comedic word play, provide a basis through which to examine comedic techniques at a linguistic level. This section examines the semiotic transformation and undermining of traditional signifiers at a linguistic level in Marx Brothers films as well as signs and signifiers at the level of visual comedic structure through the pantomime of Harpo Marx. While many of these signs can be described as
visual puns, there is communication occurring at a semiotic level that plays on cultural
customs to create meaning through the unusual juxtaposition of concepts. The humor
of the Marx Brothers allows for a semiotic approach to comedy on verbal as well as visual
levels.

Chapter 6: A Grail Shaped Beacon - Semiotics and Satire in Monty Python and the Holy
Grail

The Legend of King Arthur is replete with signs and symbols, elements that were
central to the philosophical views in the middle ages. It is a legend that has continued to
generate meaning since that time, having been interpreted in various ways over the
centuries. Monty Python and the Holy Grail uses the signs from Arthurian Legend, such
as the sign designating Arthur as king and the sign of the Holy Grail, to satirically
reinterpret their signification and comment on modern society. While parody of Arthurian
Legend is not new with Monty Python, Monty Python and the Holy Grail represents an
attempt to take the signifying events in Arthurian Legend and, through a starkly
incongruous reassignment of the meaning of those signs, produce humor and social satire.
This section focuses on humor as it is created in broadly-based social and historical sign
systems. Here a case is argued for the versatility of semiotics which can be used to
describe how comedy functions on basic levels from sound source stimuli to complex
social, literary, and historical sign systems.

Chapter 7: Dangerous Games - Roberto Benigni’s La Vita É Bella or the Aesthetics of
Comedy and Tragedy Revisited

Despite a long and successful career as an actor, writer, and director in his native
Italy (and some less successful acting forays into American cinema), it is only since the 1997 release of his La Vita É Bella (Life is Beautiful) that Roberto Benigni has gained real international attention. The critical acclaim and international awards that he received for that film, brought him international scrutiny and the inevitable swarm of critics that acclaim attracts. The critics are sharply divided on Roberto Benigni, some praising him as a deft and sensitive genius and clown, and others condemning him as an inept and inadequate imposter and buffoon. A large part of controversy over this film stems from the juxtaposition of two radically opposed sign systems: tragedy and comedy. This chapter explores how Benigni is able to interweave these two systems to create both comedy and pathos and explore why this combination is so provocative. A return to the origins of tragedy and comedy and a discussion of their roles in the modern world and the sign systems that are attached to them finishes this chapter.

The End of the Beginning

It is with some trepidation that I embark on this project. Partly because I feel, as do many who have written about comedy, that it is on some level a hopeless task to define something that by its very nature avoids definition. It is difficult, as well, to try to impose structure on something that exists to undermine and subvert structures. Comedy is a will-o'-wisp; it is always just out of reach and takes a step back with each forward step of the searcher. Perhaps a better comparison can be made to the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. Heisenberg theorized that you could know the position of a sub-atomic particle or its momentum and that the very act of observing something brings it into existence. In a sense this is what happens when we try to explain a joke. People may understand why
we thought it was funny at the time, but it no longer possesses the quality that makes it funny. Bently describes this process: “The point of a joke can be explained, but the explanation is not funny. The intellectual content is not the essence. What counts is the experience which we call ‘getting’ the joke or ‘seeing the point’” (qtd. in Kolek 148). Similarly we can find something to be funny, but are not necessarily able at the time to understand why that is so. It is not just the content that makes something funny, it is the process and the moment.

So why do I and others who have written about comedy choose to risk destroying the very thing we love by analyzing it? Certainly there is that desire to know and to understand our world. Comedy plays a large role in the lives of most people, whether it is good-natured joking with a stranger that one shares an experience with (such as an ice-breaking comment on a crowded elevator), or laughing over past experiences that seemed very serious at the time with close friends or relatives. Surely the importance of understanding something that has such a large role in our lives is self-evident. Perhaps it is the power that comedy has to critique problems or loosen tension. In short, perhaps its social value is what makes it so interesting. Maybe it is the subversive nature of comedy itself that makes it so interesting and dynamic in its effects. By removing the walls and constraints and forcing previously separate content or experience to confront each other, humor allows for dynamic artistic, spiritual, and personal growth. It is a creative act. Koestler states, “The creative act, by connecting previously unrelated dimensions of experience, enables him to attain to a higher level of mental evolution. It is an act of liberation—the defeat of habit by originality” (96).
I see all of these ideas and purposes as valid reasons to study comedy. I do, however, feel that it is a mistake to think that comedy has to be saying or doing something serious for it to be important. Just because a satire shows us the follies of a corrupt government, does not mean that it cannot be enjoyed purely as an aesthetic experience. While there is no doubt that comedy can and does fulfil this and other functions, it does not need to be saying something to be enjoyed. We should celebrate comedy for what it is and what it can do for us. And, although I will be dealing with two incongruous viewpoints as I try to analyze, in the following chapters, just how comedy functions from a semiotic perspective, I cannot help but to straddle this abyss between appreciating comedy for what it is and understanding how and why comedy functions. I hope that my analysis does not become too overly analytic to appreciate the comedy that I will be examining. Similarly, I hope that my enjoyment of the comic does not interfere with my ability to understand how it works. I am conflicted by this incongruity. As a scholar, I have to show the analytical value and seriousness of this project, but as a patron of the arts and a devotee of comedy, there is a piece of me that says I am cheating the system when I am watching a Marx Brothers film in the name of research. That little act of rebellion is liberating. In a sense, I am defying the stuffy image of academia and, at some level, I find that funny.
“The comic attitude, it must be said, is an essentially artistic attitude that has no merely natural, nonartistic counterpart. As the inner force that enables us to smile, it works as a dissolvent with respect to everything in life that tends to keep us from smiling.”

- Anne Paolucci (106)

Chapter 1: Laughing at Others’ Misfortunes - The Aesthetic Origins of Comedy and its Emergence from Tragedy

One of the problems in studying the origins and development of comedy is the comparative lack of attention it has received in academic discourse. Smith has argued that the development of comedy is rather scarce and incomplete in comparison with tragedy (13). Indeed, any academic search will reveal the inequity in the number of works on the two topics. This is beginning to change with the interest in and growing respect for popular culture as an academic topic, but still remains a comparatively small field. Even so, it is puzzling that even though comedy has proved to be so much more popular as a genre than tragedy, it still receives so little attention (Grave 7). The consensus among scholars of comedy is that, this must be due, at least in a large part, to the idea that because comedy is often considered non-serious, it cannot be seriously considered. Throughout this chapter we will explore the ideas and writings of those philosophers and scholars who have seriously considered comedy as a genre.

In this chapter, we will begin by examining the origins of comedy in the Western tradition. We will be concentrating initially on the writings of Plato and Aristotle and what they wrote about comedy. Because of the nature of Greek comedy as a theatrical
form, performed in opposition to tragedy, we will initially consider the development primarily in this context. As we leave ancient Greece, we begin considering comedy in a different oppositional relationship. It will no longer be as directly compared to tragedy, but more generally to the serious. We will look at the three major categories of philosophical theories of comedy: the relief theory, the superiority theory, and the incongruity theory. While many more theories of comedy have been put forward, these three include, within their auspices, the vast majority of comic theories. After an introduction to these theories, we will deal in more detail with some of the philosophers who argued for these theories. We will then conclude with some general observations about comedy and its relation to tragedy and comedy as an aesthetic phenomenon in preparation for explicating some of the codes that we will examine as we develop a semiotic theory of comedy in the arts.

**Origins**

The origins of Greek comedy are somewhat murky due partially to the scarcity of records surviving from the time and partially to the lack of attention it received in written discourse. What is clear, however, is that although comedy was generally looked down upon in philosophical writings by the ancient Greek philosophers as an inferior form of art, it did play an important role in the ancient world and followed certain stylistic and aesthetic tendencies. By studying the writings of Plato and Aristotle, certain ideas and patterns in their thoughts about comedy begin to emerge. These patterns are by no means clear or monolithic, but they do point to what comedy was and what these philosophers believed it accomplished.
First, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of what the ancient Greeks meant when they wrote about comedy. As was mentioned previously, they did not have the same broad concept of comedy more typical of modern times, but rather they had a fairly specific theatrical form in mind. For the Greeks, satire, lampoons, and comedies were separated into different categories with different characteristics and purposes. For the purposes of this examination of comedy, the broader term will generally be used even though individual forms of comic treatment may not embody each of the characteristics discussed.

As was mentioned earlier, the origins of Greek comedy are somewhat nebulous and our knowledge of them is subject to error. Even something as simple as when and at what ancient Greek audiences laughed, is still, really an unknown quantity (Stewart 33). There are varying accounts of the origins of comedy which never seem to have been satisfactorily reconciled. Kerr in his discussion on tragedy and comedy states: “It is hard to be sure of our ground among the Greeks. Aristotle’s account of the origins of comedy is baffling; though highly intelligent attempts have been made to clarify and correct it, it is unlikely that we shall ever be able to say firmly that this is the way Greek comedy came about” (22). Aristotle says several things about the origin of comedies, all of which may be true, but his various accounts still present a confusing picture for modern scholars. In his Poetics, Aristotle indicates that the Athenians, Dorians, and the Megarians in Sicily all claimed the origins of comedy (4). He later claims that Homer was the first to write comedy. “Just as Homer was the greatest composer of serious poetry [. . .] so too he was first to indicate the form of comedy, by dramatising not an invective but the laughable”
Shortly before this, he draws a distinction between the lampoon, which attacked or inveighed against someone, and comedy which he considered “greater and more honorable” (5) in form. Still later, Aristotle suggests that comedy came “from an improvisatory beginning [. . .] from the leaders of the phallic processions” (6). Elliott describes these processions:

The Phallic Songs were, of course, ritual performances devoted to increasing the fertility of the land, the herds, and the people. The ritual seems to have had two general parts: the invocation of good through the magic influence of the phallus, and the expulsion of evil by means of the magic power of satire, invective, lampoon—this last improvised by the Leaders of the Songs. In the apotropaic part of the ritual the satire might be hurled at wicked individuals by name or at evil influences generally; but for our purposes the important consideration is that the satire was thought to be magically efficacious. It was a coercion of certain natural forces through the magical potency of the word. (149)

Two interesting elements here are the tendency to criticize or make fun of someone or some thing which will be developed in the explanation of the superiority theory of comedy, and the focus of the ceremony on life and fertility which will be explored later as well. While it remains unclear how comedy really originated, Silk suggests that one of the possible reasons for this multiplicity of possible origins is related to the differences in performance and style between the outlying areas’ versions of comedy and the Attic form (70). Aristotle, in his writings, not only presents a range of potentially contradictory
material about the origins of comedy, but he even suggests why the origins of comedy have been forgotten. “The transformations of tragedy, and [the poets] who brought them about, have not been forgotten; but comedy was disregarded from the beginning, because it was not taken seriously” (6, bracketing in original). It is unclear whether Aristotle intended his comment on taking comedy seriously as a form of wordplay and if so, one wonders if Aristotle was aware that comedy would be taken so seriously as a field of study in the modern world.

It is not too difficult to understand why Aristotle would say that comedy is not taken seriously. Comedy was often rough, irreverent, and could be offensive. Attardo states: “most of Greek humor consists in what today would be rather crude slapstick, obscenity and profanity, insults, and puns” (21). While this is a bit of an oversimplification of a multifaceted phenomenon, it does indicate why comedy has been stuck with such a bad reputation in comparison to the nobler and more ennobling tragedy. In addition, political figures and leaders who found themselves the butts of such ridicule, understandably, had little reason to praise and promote comedy. Henderson goes so far as to suggest that comedy provided a sort of yearly review of prominent Athenians and thus constrained, to a certain extent, their behavior (307). Generally any current topic in political or public life was considered fair game for the subject of comedies (Wilkins 52) and this interest in current topics is one of the elements that separates comedy from tragedy which was, at least ostensibly, about ancient myth and heroic figures. Additionally, comedy was self-aware and meta-theatrical millennia before serious theorists came up with those terms. “The comic genre in the fifth century regularly played on the
interaction between audience and performer, and regularly broke the dramatic illusion by reference to itself, its practice and its costume” (Green and Handley 26). Comedy, although accepted as a regular dramatic form in the Dionysia and later in the Lenaia, presents a complex genre that draws on various traditions and styles, yet at the same time often undermines them and their intended functions.

The existence of satyr plays additionally complicates theories about the origin of comedy in its dramatic and non-dramatic forms. The word satire and our modern conception of it originally come from this dramatic form. The surviving evidence of satyr plays is largely fragmentary (Griffith 195) with only Euripides’ *Cyclops* surviving in a completed form. Another satyr play by Sophocles, *Ichneutai*, survives in an incomplete form (Green and Handley 29). We do know that the satyr play took place after a series of three tragedies and it is generally agreed that it served as a means of comic relief from the serious nature of the tragedies that had just taken place (Green and Handley 23; Griffith 196). Like comedy, satyr plays generally used a different and lower, more prosaic, vocabulary than tragedy, although they would borrow the tragic language as necessary (Lissarrague 235; Sommerstein 23). Although Kerr suggests that satyr plays mocked the material that the tragedies had just presented in serious fashion (23), it seems likely that the relationship between satyr plays and tragedies is somewhat more complex.

Griffith argues that although the traditional approach to these satyr plays is to read them against the tragedies that they accompany, they were considered an integral part of the competition of tragedy (196). It is evident that the satyr play had a comic purpose, in the more modern sense of the word, but it differs in some significant ways from the
dramatic comedy of the time. Lissarrague explicates some of the key differences between the forms:

Sometimes comedy parodies tragedy, quoting passages from tragedies and putting its own characters into situations analogous to those of tragic heroes; it incorporates and distorts the tragic style to fashion its own brand of significance. Comedy makes equal use of present reality, especially politics, and caricatures living figures. Finally, comedy undercuts theatrical illusion and plays with the various levels of fiction [. . .]. None of this appears in satyric drama, which follows tragedy in its complete respect for the fiction of the stage. The play stays at one remove from the audience, which observes without being called to account. Satyric drama as far as we know never parodies tragedy, and the principal characters, such as Odysseus, maintain their epic stature without any caricature or burlesque.

(235-6)

This places the satyr play as a dramatic form somewhere between tragedy and comedy, similar to Northrop Frye’s modern classification of the genres. Indeed, although Griffith’s stated purpose is to argue for the similarities and connections of satyr plays to tragedy, he ultimately admits that they are somewhere between the two forms (205, 222). Satyr plays were able to address serious subjects in a comedic way, by looking at the topics of tragedy through the peculiar viewpoints of satyrs, creatures who are half man-half goat. Just as their physical bodies are somewhere between two worlds (perhaps the goat-like qualities of the satyrs and the origins of tragedy which originally meant “goat song” is not without
significance), so too their way of seeing the world is both animal and rational. This form of double vision, I would suggest, allows the satyrs to see and exemplify incongruities, which, as we shall see, is central to much of comedy. As Lissarrague suggests, satires play “with the displacement, distortion, and reversal of what constitutes the world and culture of men” (236). Because of its location between tragedy and comedy satire is a useful means of not only examining the similarities and differences of those two dramatic forms, but also becomes a useful tool for analyzing the modern connections between these two modes of discourse.

As a dramatic form comedy invariably comes after tragedy. More generally the existence of the serious seems to be necessary in order for comedy to have material to mock or imitate. Historically, this is also the case, at least in the official state sanction of the dramatic forms. Tragedy was officially recognized by the ancient Greeks in 535 B.C. and comedy was not to be so institutionalized until 486 B.C. (Kerr 20). Comedy needed to build on some of the characteristics established by tragedy in order for it to begin to mature into its own form. “A notable feature of the development of Greek comedy is that motifs and structures which are first introduced by way of parody and burlesque of tragedy somehow take root in their new environment and continue as part of the comic tradition” (Green and Handley 53). Tragedy provides the basis that comedy reacts against and undermines as it develops in form. This relationship helps to explain the temporal gap in the official acceptance of the two forms. This temporal separation between the serious and its comic counterpart seems to still hold true in the modern day, indicating a logical pattern or progression that must take place in order for comedy to exist. Modern scholar
John Cawelti draws on the comedies of Aristophanes to justify his theory on the life cycle of film genres (236-7). Cawelti’s description of the cycle of genres could be very easily applied specifically to the life cycle of tragedy and comedy.

One can almost make out a life cycle characteristic of genres as they move from an initial period of articulation and discovery, through a phase of conscious self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences, to a time when the generic patterns have become so well-known that people become tired of their predictability. It is at this point that parodic and satiric treatments proliferate and new genres gradually arise. (244)

Greek comedy established a pattern that would continue to be followed throughout time indicating the necessity of a serious subject for comedy to comment on. In addition to the inferior position that comedy had because of its relative newness in ancient Greek theater (a tradition that has continued to today), it was also put into a position of inferiority based on the amount of representation it received, or in modern terminology, its face time. In the Dionysia, a chorus performed three tragedies and one satyr play while a comic chorus performed only one comedy (Sommerstein 8). Despite this inequality, Kerr suggests that comedy was necessary to complete tragedy, an idea that comes up at various points in the writings of Plato and Aristotle as will be discussed later. “There is a strong probability, then, that when the comic tone first became recognizable it became recognizable as burlesque of the solemn and sacred. That is what it is there for: to repair an omission. The solemn, the sacred, the tragic, in its upward strain invariably leaves something out” (Kerr 25). Comedy is the completion of the tragic or the serious.
The Philosophical Comic Tradition in Ancient Greece

To continue our examination of comedy in ancient Greece, we will look at the writings of two major philosophical figures who were concerned with comedy, Plato and Aristotle. It is helpful to directly study their writings to better understand how they viewed comedy and what they felt its purpose was. It is important to remember that the writing of these two philosophers tends to reveal their personal assumptions about the subject, rather than necessarily reflecting the views of the population of ancient Greece as a whole. While we have mentioned some discussion of the role of comedy for the people of ancient Greece in general, the importance of the writings of these two philosophers, should not be underestimated because of the enormous effect that their writings would have on later comic theorists.

Plato writes surprisingly little that specifically addresses comedy, and there is definitely an ambiguous quality to what he does say. In fact, in his Republic there is even a question of whether or not to allow tragedy and comedy into the republic (Republic III 394d). Plato ostensibly considers comedy a rather low form of art. In his Laws, he indicates that comic representations are for the lower classes. “We shall enjoin that such representations be left to slaves or hired aliens, and that they receive no serious consideration whatsoever. No free person, whether woman or man, shall be found taking lessons in them” (Plato Laws VII 816d). In book II of Laws, an interesting dialogue between an Athenian and Clinias takes place, again making obvious the relative importance Plato assigns to comedy. The Athenian describes a hypothetical contest in which a prize will be given to the performer who entertains the spectators most. He then
suggests that if different people perform different things such as epic poetry, a chant accompanied by a lyre, a tragedy, a comedy, and a puppet show, then different groups will value different types of performance. The Athenian’s answer as to who will win provides a clear picture of what Plato considers the hierarchy of worth of the different art forms:

Then here it is. If the tiny children are to decide, they will, no doubt, give it for the man with the puppet show. [ . . . ] The bigger boys for the comedian; the cultivated women, youths, and perhaps the absolute majority, for the tragedy. [ . . . ] Whereas oldsters like ourselves would be likely to get most pleasure from a reciter who gave a fine rendering of the Iliad, or Odyssey, or a Hesiodic poem, and put him far and away first.

(Laws II 658)

The speakers then conclude that the older men are right since the performance that deserves to win should be the one that pleases the best spectators the most (Laws II 658-659).

Plato’s views on laughter also prove illuminating, not only to his views on comedy, but will also become important in studying the purpose of comedy. Plato looks on laughter as if it were an undesirable vice. “Again, they must not be prone to laughter. For ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter his condition provokes a violent reaction. [. . . ] Then if anyone represents men of worth as overpowered by laughter we must not accept it, much less if gods” (Republic III 388e, 389). He also condemns the use of comedy to cause laughter at the expense of fellow citizens. “No composer of comedy, iambic or lyric verse shall be permitted to hold any citizen up to laughter, by word or
gesture, with passion or otherwise; in case of disobedience the presidents of the festival shall give orders for the offender’s expulsion” (Laws XI 935). Kitano suggests that Plato specifically had Aristophanes and his contemporaries in mind when he wrote this (199). For Plato, it is important that the comedy have no teeth. Plato, no doubt, had sufficient cause for concern about the possible dangers of this aspect of comedy. Plato claimed in his Apology that the negative portrayal of Socrates in Aristophanes’ Clouds was a factor in his being condemned to death (Shelly 351). Critical comedy cannot be in earnest or damaging or it is civilly undesirable. If the comedy or satire has been approved, and it is in good fun, it is acceptable to Plato (Laws XI 936), but only on those conditions is it to be allowed.

Although it is widely accepted that Plato did have a generally negative view of comedy as a theatrical form, he still made use of it in his own writing as a rhetorical device. Plato has been described as given to using jokes, puns (Sprague 53-58), wordplay, running gags, and even imitating comic genres in his use of dialogue (Brock 42, 44). Shelly also argues that Plato showed comedy in a positive light in his representation of Socrates and his use of humor (352-3). Plato’s use of humor is somewhat problematic considering his overt condemnation of it. Shelly suggests an interpretation of Plato’s use of humor that proves to be intriguing: “The love of knowledge is compatible with an appreciation of humor because humor alerts the philosophic person to a confusion in thinking. He may then enjoy the prospect of clearing the confusion up. Humor can thus be an aid in philosophical inquiry” (Shelley 358). Ironically, for Plato, comedy can be a double edged sword. It can both be used as a tool for philosophical understanding, but it
can also be abused in criticizing real people. Yet, even this idea is further complicated by the idea that Plato puts forward in his *Symposium* that the plays of Aristophanes are useful in explaining Athenian politics (Brock 39). Indeed, Plato seems to be holding two incongruous viewpoints about Aristophanes and his comedy, namely that it is useful in explaining politics, but it also was responsible, to some extent, for the death of Socrates.

The problems that we encounter in trying to understand how Plato viewed comedy are further complicated when we begin to study Aristotle. This becomes problematic because, unfortunately, relatively little of what Aristotle wrote about comedy is still in existence. Although there have been attempts to recreate his second book of *Poetics*, any such attempt is at best highly speculative. Halliwell indicates that Aristotle promises a discussion of comedy which does not take place in the existing *Poetics*. He states that “our texts of the treatise do not contain the discussion of comedy which is promised at the beginning of ch. 6 [. . .] and which we would expect to follow the section on epic” (266). Janko is even more bold in his assertion about the existence of a second book of *Poetics*, one which he meticulously and credibly attempts to reconstruct.

That a second book of the *Poetics* was not only planned by Aristotle, but also written, is clear beyond doubt. It is clear also that a large-scale treatment of comedy was envisaged, not merely a section of briefer scope like that on epic in the extant work. The evidence for these propositions is threefold: Aristotle’s own statements, the fragments and the external testimonia. (*On Comedy* 63)

While it seems that it will never be definitively resolved what Aristotle actually wrote
about comedy in his second book of *Poetics*. Janko's reconstructions are fairly credible and cast some light on the ancient aesthetics and understanding of comedy.

In the existing writing of Aristotle, we do have some insight into his views on comedy. Like Plato, he seemed to view comedy as lower and less important than tragedy. In his description of the origin of comedy, Aristotle points out one possible origin of the word as coming from a term used to refer to people who “wandered around the villages, ejected in disgrace from the town” (4). The less than complimentary origins of the word indicate a certain lack of regard for the form. In another section of *Poetics*, Aristotle has just finished praising elements of tragedy when he turns his discussion to comedy. He claims that popular views might place a comic structure above a tragic structure, but this is not the case. “This [structure] would seem to be first because of the weakness of the audiences; the poets follow the spectators, composing to suit their wishes. But this is not the pleasure [that comes] from tragedy, but is more particular to comedy” (17, bracketing in original). This might be considered to be a kind of intellectual elitism, but it very much stems from a view that is central to Aristotle’s understanding of comedy: “comedy prefers to represent people who are worse than those who exist, tragedy people who are better” (3). For Aristotle, the position of the spectator must necessarily be above the people and situations presented in a comedy. Also inherent in this comparison is the idea that comedy is made of “the same constitutive elements as tragedy” (Kitano 196).

Comedy for Aristotle must also be a thing with no real damaging effects. He suggests that comedies should be generalized and not attack specific people. “When [comic poets] have composed a plot according to probability, only then do they supply the
names at random; they do not, like the composers of lampoons, compose [poems] about particular individuals” (12, bracketing in original). This points to the idea that both Plato and Aristotle think that comedy has a purpose other than ridiculing people or situations.

Richard Janko in his recreation of Aristotle’s Poetics II provides some interesting additional insights into what comedy is and how it works. Based on several ancient texts, including some of Aristotle’s other writings, and existing fragments of Poetics II, his reconstruction parallels Aristotle’s treatment of tragedies in some interesting ways. For example, comedy has the same basic elements as tragedy. “For this reason the elements of all comic representation are necessarily four: diction, plot, character and reasoning. Comedy is superior to lampoon in this, since it has song and spectacle also” (Aristotle 51). Aristotle also defines several ways that laughter arises in audiences. It is interesting that many of the things he suggests show themselves to be the opposite or a subversion of the tragic mode. For instance, he suggests that laughter comes from making characters base rather than ennobling them. It also comes from bad choices, vulgar dancing, and the presentation of the inconsequential. Some ideas that are subverted from tragedy are its use of events against expectation, deception, and the impossible for comic purposes (Janko, On Comedy 37). Another characteristic also serves to situate comedy in a lesser position. “Comic diction is common and popular. The comic poet must endue his characters with their own native idiom, and (use) the local (idiom) himself” (Janko, On Comedy 39). Comedy uses a lesser or colloquial form of speech (Brock 42), showing the people in it as inferiors rather than allowing them to speak a higher, more educated and proper form of Greek.
Halliwell suggests that another characteristic of Greek comedy is its subject matter. He states that “tragedy normally took its material from heroic myth and saga, while comic plots were frequently built around fictitious figures from the ordinary world” (267). This again emphasizes some of the clear inferiority that comedy by nature of its subject matter was assumed to have in relation to tragedy. Halliwell also suggests the need for internal unity within a comic plot for it to be coherent (268). As Kerr points out, this does not seem to hold true for many Greek comedies. “[T]here may even be something in the nature of comedy that inclines toward roundabout improvisation rather than toward steady vertical progression” (66). Comedies do tend to follow certain structures, but are in many ways deconstructive in nature. As such, it becomes problematic to assume that comedy will follow any structure too closely.

One interesting element that Plato and Aristotle seem to agree on is the sometimes very thin line between comedy and tragedy. In *Philebus*, Plato quotes Socrates who describes how pleasure and pain are often related. “The upshot of our argument then is that when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, we are mixing pleasure this time with malice, mixing, that is, our pleasure with pain, for we have been for some time agreed that malice is a pain in the soul, and that laughter is a pleasure, and both occur simultaneously on the occasions in question” (50b). Socrates then goes on to describe how closely related tragedy and comedy really are. “Hence our argument now makes it plain that in laments and tragedies and comedies and not only in those of the stage but in the whole tragicomedy of life as well as on countless other occasions, pains are mixed with pleasures” (*Philebus* 50b). Kerr attempts to explain this phenomenon in more
psychological terms. “We do often cry when we laugh. We cry because the disparity is unthinkable, and we laugh because there is no other thing we can do about it” (145). His insight points to the place where tragedy and comedy seem to be most aligned and indeed indicates their very purpose. Plato says: “For it is impossible to learn the serious without the comic” (Plato Laws 816d Perseus). This is one point on which Halliwell suggests that Plato and Aristotle are in agreement (267). Comedy and tragedy exist in a kind of symbiosis. They complete and feed each other.

The point where the two philosophers seem to diverge most radically is in the conflict surrounding Aristotle’s concept of catharsis. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy introduces this term.

[Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements used] separately in the [various] parts [of the play]; [represented] by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions. (7, bracketing in original)

Although the exact shades of definition of catharsis is another topic that has been debated over the years, the basic purpose of catharsis in tragedy is to remove these powerful emotions. In his proposed reconstruction of the second book of Poetics, Janko recreates Aristotle’s parallel definition of comedy.

Comedy is a representation of an action that is laughable and lacking in magnitude, complete, [in embellished speech,] with each of its parts [used] separately in the [various] elements [of the play; represented] by people
acting and [not] by narration; accomplishing by means of pleasure and
laughter the catharsis of such emotions. It has laughter as its mother.

(Aristotle 43-44, bracketing in original)

Janko readily admits that his reconstruction of this work is highly controversial (Janko, Introduction to Poetics), nevertheless, there is evidence in the existing writing of both Plato and Aristotle that they believe that comedy was related to these feelings.

Plato, in his Republic records an interesting conversation that sheds light on why it would be necessary to control these emotions of pity and fear. This is closely related to the idea of control or calmness as a desired trait in Greek society. “But when in our own lives some affliction comes to us, you are also aware that we plume ourselves upon the opposite, on our ability to remain calm and endure, in the belief that this is the conduct of a man” (605e). For Plato, this restraint was an essential characteristic of a good and noble citizen. Where he differs from Aristotle, and perhaps why he questions whether or not to even allow tragedy and comedy in the republic, is that he does not seem to think that theatrical representations will purge these emotions, but rather reinforce them. He says “few are capable of reflecting that what we enjoy in others will inevitably react upon ourselves. For after feeding fat the emotion of pity there, it is not easy to restrain it in our own sufferings” (Republic 606b). He then goes on to suggest that a similar process happens with comedy.

Does not the same principle apply to the laughable, namely, that if in comic representations, or for that matter in private talk, you take intense pleasure in buffooneries that you would blush to practice yourself, and do not detest
them as base, you are doing the same thing as in the case of the pathetic?

(Republic 606c)

Plato seems to think that by viewing these buffooneries, viewers will become desensitized to the fact that they are practicing them themselves.

Aristotle has a very different understanding of the purpose of both tragedy and comedy. He seems to agree with Plato’s statement that “there must be restraint of unseasonable laughter and tears and each of us must urge his fellow to consult decorum by utter concealment of all excess of joy or grief” (Laws V 732). In his introduction to The Poetics, Janko states: “As we have it, the Poetics provides no explicit reply to Plato’s argument that tragedy, comedy and epic stir up our emotions, which we should instead seek to control” (xvi). It seems reasonably clear, however, that Aristotle believes that instead of increasing these unwanted or unseasonable displays of emotion, the representation of such emotion in the theater would purge it from people. There is evidence for this belief even in the surviving Poetics. Aristotle states: “For we should not seek every [kind of] pleasure from tragedy, but [only] the sort which is particular to it. Since the poet should use representation to produce the pleasure [arising] from pity and terror, it is obvious that this must be put into the incidents” (18, bracketing in original). It seems logical that viewers should seek in comedy the sort of pleasure that is particular to it as well. As Janko describes in his reconstruction of Poetics II:

Now that we have examined the various constituents of humour, we can explain what we said above about the aim of tragedy and comedy, namely catharsis. This is the cause for the sake of which drama is performed. For
just as in tragedies there is to be a due modicum of fear in the audience, so that the force of these emotions is reduced by their being given expression through the mimesis, to remedy evil with evil as one might say, so too there is to be a modicum of the laughable in comedies, with the beneficial effect of reducing the human propensity to excessive buffoonery and impropriety.

(On Comedy 96)

Aristotle believes that the purpose of representing these feelings in theater is to purge or get rid of them and make the viewer a more controlled and serious citizen.

Kerr suggests that these two sets of emotional representation have always been related in Greek theater. “The forms are inseparable, then, one incomplete without the other. Tragedy is the forward or upward thrust, comedy is the drag or reminder. In the first Greek arrangement of plays we hear about, the two are balanced in just this way, with the satyr child being born directly of its tragic mother” (26). The comic and the tragic are inseparably connected for both Plato and Aristotle. They both believe that these intense feelings are inappropriate in most social and civic spheres of life. They differ in that Plato believes that these emotions must be repressed and not agitated, while Aristotle thinks that they should be expressed and purged.

It is difficult to understand, with certainty, the way that the ancient Greeks viewed comedy because of the great chronological distances and the lack of specific information presented in the extant writings. As Janko argues, “some of the Treatise’s limitations on comedy are caused by its date, and others by its scope” (On Comedy 101). Nevertheless, there are some generalized conclusions that can be drawn from the material available.
These conclusions are by nature arguable, but can provide insight into the formulaic elements and aesthetics of ancient comedy.

Perhaps one of the reasons why it is difficult to obtain a clear understanding of ancient comedy is that the ancient Greeks themselves seem not to have had a clear concept of comedy as a finished form, and indeed in the fifth century there was no uniform style or agreed upon approach to comedy (Henderson 293). Aristotle, for instance, states explicitly his understanding of the evolution of tragedy. He states, “[tragedy] grew little by little, as [the poets] developed whatever [new part] of it had appeared; and, passing through many changes, tragedy came to a halt, since it had attained its own nature” (6, bracketing in original). For Aristotle, tragedy had attained its own nature or become settled and codified as a literary form. Halliwell argues that this was not necessarily the case with comedy.

But Aristotle’s other references to comedy are too casual and allusive to allow a conclusive inference to be drawn about his views of existing plays, or for us to be sure that he regarded any particular type of comedy as fully embodying the ideal. We ought at least to keep open the possibility that he did not accept that the natural evolution of the genre had yet reached its final maturity. (274)

This proves to be particularly true for the works of Aristophanes, which, although they have internally consistent stylistic tendencies, do not really embody what Kitano argues is for Aristotle the proper end of the genre, namely the ridiculous. The ridiculous is a kind of error that is not serious and does not have pathos in opposition to the error inherent in
tragedy (Kitano 197). The types of plot that Aristotle felt were the proper end of comedy appear in Greek New Comedy, but are not present in Aristophanes (Kitano 197).

While a close examination of specific ancient Greek comedies is beyond the scope of this chapter a few generalized observations of how comedy works in Aristotle’s view is in order. As we can see, comic drama, is fairly easy to define, while comedy, in general, proves to be more difficult to assign hard and fast definitions. By its very nature of subverting the normal or the standard, it tends to be difficult to circumscribe within a limiting or finite set of characteristics. Aristotle attempts to describe some of the basic differences between different forms, including epic, tragedy, comedy, and music. In somewhat cryptic writing Aristotle states, “They differ from one another in three ways, by using for the representation (i) different media, (ii) different objects, or (iii) a manner that is different and not the same” (1). Different media, of course, refers to the different types or (as modern students of literary forms might say) genres. Different objects could be referring to the different emotions that the art forms are intending to stir up in the spectator; pity and fear or pleasure and laughter. The different manner could be considered, in the case of comedy, the way that it subverts or changes the formulaic techniques of other forms, like tragedy. Silk states that “comedy presupposes comparison, whereas serious art, such as tragedy, does not. In the Aristotelian tradition, comedy consists in ‘the comparison of some eccentricity with a norm’” (83). One example of this comparison could be the difference in how Euripides and Aristophanes represent Dionysus in their plays *The Bacchae* and *The Frogs*, respectively. While this is a gross oversimplification of these dramatic representations, Euripides’ tragedy presents Dionysus
as a strong, powerful, and cunning character while Aristophanes presents him as foolish and weak so that the viewer will look down on him.

Another method of looking at how the ancient Greeks viewed comedy is in contrast to tragedy. Indeed, it seems that in order to represent a comic character, one need only look at Aristotle’s requirements for a tragic character and simply invert them.

(i) First and foremost, the characters should be good. [The tragedy] will have character if, as we said, the speech or the action makes obvious a decision of whatever sort; it will have a good character, if it makes obvious a good decision. [. . .]

(ii) Second, [they should be] appropriate. It is possible to be manly in character, but it is not appropriate for a woman to be so manly or clever.

(iii) Third, [the character should be life-]like. This is different from making the character good and appropriate in the way already stated.

(iv) Fourth, [the character should be] consistent. (19, bracketing in original)

By creating a character that has the opposite of these qualities, an author can create a comic character that inverts the tragic characteristics. Specifically comic characters can be made from characters who are (i) bad, (ii) inappropriate in behavior or character, (iii) un-lifelike, and (iv) inconsistent. Similarly, by inverting or subverting many of Aristotle’s characteristics of tragedy, a comic outcome can be achieved.

When compared to tragedy, the ancient Greeks seemed to view comedy as an inferior form of art. It not only dealt with inferior people, but it also was not counted as
high a form of entertainment as tragedy or epic poetry. Despite this and the lack of solid evidence surrounding the ancient Greek’s understanding and view of comedy, it is apparent that comedy played an important and necessary role in the ancient world in the same way that it does today. Plato may have questioned whether or not to allow comedy in his Republic, but, as was mentioned, perhaps he too was guilty, from time to time, of using this low form of entertainment. At the end of his Symposium, he describes a philosophical conversation between Socrates, Agathon, and Aristophanes as overheard by Aristodemus. They were speaking late into the night and drinking heavily as Socrates made his argument. Although this was an ostensibly serious argument, there is a comic element in Plato’s presentation of the event. Perhaps Plato was guilty of a sly grin and a wink as he penned the last few lines.

Socrates was arguing with the others not that Aristodemus could remember very much of what he said, for, besides having missed the beginning, he was still more than half asleep. But the gist of it was that Socrates was forcing them to admit that the same man might be capable of writing both comedy and tragedy–that the tragic poet might be a comedian as well.

But as he clinched the argument, which the other two were scarcely in a state to follow, they began to nod, and first Aristophanes fell off to sleep and then Agathon, as day was breaking. Whereupon Socrates tucked them up comfortably and went away (Symposium 223).
Old and New Comedy

As we continue our discussion of the origins of comedy, it is useful to look at its historical development in a little more detail. Specifically, we want to examine some of the essential differences between Old and New Comedy. This is important for understanding not only the development of comic thought and practice and how comedy is incorporated into various art forms, but the formal aspect of the structure of these two different forms of comedy will also become important as we look at the structural creation of narrative meaning and prepare to analyze what happens in narrative comedy at a semiotic level.

Part of the problem with situating ourselves in respect to Old and New Comedy is that they both suffer under the same problems as does much of the early Greek material on comedy, namely, there is so little that has survived up to the present that it is difficult to formulate a clear idea of what the forms actually were. For example, our understanding of Old Comedy is based primarily on what we know from the eleven existing plays of Aristophanes and thousands of fragments from other plays (Wilkins 42). Understanding Old Comedy would be like attempting to construct a coherent picture of twentieth century film comedy based entirely on the oeuvre of Woody Allen and a series of snippets from other contemporary comedies. While this is somewhat of an oversimplification (we do have some historical evidence and scholars agree that Aristophanes was not radically different from most of his contemporaries in most respects), it does serve to point out the difficulties of establishing our footing when we describe what we think Old Comedy was. Even if our understanding of these ancient works, was largely incorrect, it would not
diminish the usefulness of these categories, nor would it affect how the concept of these
categories has been examined and used since ancient times.

What we learn from Aristophanes’ comedy is that it was initially highly formalized
with recurring themes, forms, and traditions. Smith argues that the structure of
Aristophanic comedy is a result of its development from folk comedy and Dionysian ritual
(84). This structure is largely consistent throughout his plays using standard elements
(Olson 11). The play begins with a prologue or exposition. After that comes the entry of
the chorus, a contest between the different characters, and then the Parabasis where the
chorus interrupts the dramatic action of the play and directly addresses the audience
(Smith 87-8). (We will return to this idea of the breaking of frame and of directly
addressing the audience when we study the Marx Brothers in chapter five.) After the
Parabasis, there is generally a sacrifice, a feast and a festal procession during which
unwelcome antagonists try to interrupt the proceedings (Smith 87-8). Other
characteristics of Old Comedy include a loose plot that begins with a “hero’s grand and
improbable plan, which sets the plot in motion” (Olson 11), a use of castigation, concern
with social issues (Merchant 76), use of satire, and a focus on politics (Green and Handley
49). Aristophanes also frequently uses animals as characters embodying a long tradition in
Greek theater of song and dance and of representing wild creatures (Green and Handley
49). One interesting aspect of Old Comedy is its topical nature. “Real people in the
audience are mocked under their real names and the action of the play is set in the actual
year of its production” (Redfield 329). Old Comedy is direct and much more closely
related to satires and lampoons, forms that were criticized by Plato and Aristotle, than is
the case with New Comedy. Despite this criticism, the characters that appear in Old Comedy frequently claimed in their speeches to have a valid and serious purpose. Henderson states:

[T]he poets consistently said that their advice and admonishments to the spectators were true and just, that their explicit and often mordantly abusive treatment of individuals (through ‘mockery’) would purify the polis and advance the people’s interests, and that their portrayal of contemporary reality, however novel or facetious, was essentially believable. (271)

This goes back to the idea presented that even though Plato thought comedy was an inferior art form, it still served a philosophical, and in this case, political purpose. Again, because of the specific circumstances that led to the condemnation of Socrates, Plato would have likely viewed this function of comedy ambiguously at best.

One of the critical elements for William Paul, who is looking at the parallels between ancient and modern comedy, is its subject matter. “More striking is its sense of license, an almost total lack of inhibition in its view of both sexual and social relations” (7). In addition, Old Comedy tends to be violent in nature including physical assaults and insults (Olson 13). It is also generally characterized by a heavy reliance on the form of tragedy as a point of comparison (Silk 55).

This reliance on tragedy is interesting in light of my contention that comedy, as a form, relies on existing signifying systems in order to undermine or subvert them. “Old Comedy often incorporated whole scenes of ‘paratragedy’ that absurdly replayed typical
or specific material from epic or tragedy” (Griffith 199). Silk is careful to emphasize his belief that Aristophanes alluded to tragedy more and was more interested in tragedy and tragic figures than his contemporaries (49), but the relationship does provide some insight into comedy as a form. This form however, began to change even within the course of Aristophanes’ career. Scholars have noted a change in Aristophanes’ works from his earlier, more political plays to his last extant play, *Plutus*, which prefigures, in some respects, the New Comedy typified by Menander (Grawe 70; Silk 69). Silk views this change as indicative of comedy’s attempt to define itself (97), while Grawe is careful to point out that, despite their differences, Old and New Comedy are part of the same dramatic tradition and competed in the same national contests (70). Some important changes occurred during this time period. Specifically, this period saw the end of the Athenian Empire, which Redfield suggests is signified in the change in Aristophanes’ comedies (327). This change would portend the arrival of New Comedy.

What we actually know about New Comedy from direct sources is even more limited than Old Comedy. From this period we have in its entirety only Menander’s *Dyskolos* (a relatively modern discovery), fragments of several plays, and Roman adaptations of Greek originals. O’Bryhim suggests that this information reveals a significant amount about these New Comedy dramas, specifically that “they are almost always set in Athens [. . .]; they deal with universal themes (usually family problems); they contain few references to contemporary figures or political situations; they make extensive use of stock characters such as mercenaries, cooks, and prostitutes; and some incorporated elements or themes from Euripides’ tragedies” (87). This paints a picture of comedy that
has a form and subject matter that is very different from its predecessor. It is generally agreed that New Comedy is a much more accessible and timeless form than Old Comedy and does not require as extensive a knowledge of the conditions and politics of Athens to understand it. Because this type of comedy dealt with more universal situations, it was easier for wider groups to understand. Taplin, who studies the material culture of Ancient Greece primarily through Greek vase paintings states, “It appears from reflection in the visual arts that Menandrian comedy won immediate popularity throughout the Greek-speaking world” (2). Green and Handley go so far as to suggest that not only was Menandrian comedy quite popular, but that it, in fact, supplanted tragedy as the major dramatic genre during this period (71). This popularity proves to be important for us in tracing the development of comedy in the theater. As was mentioned previously, New Comedy was often copied and rewritten in Roman times. This is a tradition that has continued from that time and “eventually produces the comic drama of Shakespeare, Moliere and Chekhov” (Silk 51). This connection will become important for us when we study some modern comic embodiments of the spirit of both Old and New Comedy.

Before we move on to more modern views of comedy, it is useful to summarize some of the important characteristics of New and Old Comedy and their relations to philosophic thought on comedy. Frye does an elegant job of summarizing some of the most salient points of interest for us:

The clearest example of high mimetic comedy is the Old Comedy of Aristophanes. The New Comedy of Menander is closer to the low mimetic, and through Plautus and Terence its formulas were handed down
to the Renaissance, so that there has always been a strongly low mimetic bias to social comedy [...]. We notice that just as there is a catharsis of pity and fear in tragedy, so there is a catharsis of the corresponding comic emotions, which are sympathy and ridicule, in Old Comedy. Thus Old Comedy, like the tragedy contemporary with it, is a blend of the heroic and the ironic. [...] New Comedy normally presents an erotic intrigue between a young man and a young woman which is blocked by some kind of opposition, usually paternal, and resolved by a twist in the plot which is the comic form of Aristotle’s ‘discovery,’ and is more manipulated than its tragic counterpart. (Frye 43-4)

These structural or formal characteristics of both Old and New Comedy will become useful to us as we attempt to explore at a semiotic level, how comedy uses and abuses these formats for humorous purposes.

Modern Philosophical Theories of Comedy

The major problem with philosophical theories of comedy is that they are rarely funny. The theories behind why something is comic are certainly not funny, and frequently, the examples that are put forth are rarely convincing enough to cause side-splitting laughter. Philosophers labor under the same onus as anyone who tries to write about comedy, namely that the process of describing why something is funny often destroys its humor. In addition, because of the wide range of backgrounds, time periods, and native languages of the various philosophers, relatively few modern readers have the contextual competence to understand the funniness of the examples let alone actually find
them funny. The question of whether philosophers are actually comedians, who were not
good enough to make a living at it (those who cannot do, teach) is just the sort of
frivolous question that causes scholars to not take comedy seriously and will not be
addressed in this work. With these caveats, we will begin to explore modern philosophical
theories of comedy.

Although there are a multitude of modern comic theories, most of them fall, more
or less, within three general categories. Different scholars have come up with different
names and different ways of categorizing them, but the majority of scholars follow this
general categorical framework. The three theories are the superiority theory, the relief
theory, and the incongruity theory. For the purposes of this study, primary attention will
be paid to the incongruity theory, as the most useful for our development of a semiotic
theory of comedy. All of these theories have their individual strengths and weaknesses,
and are useful in specific situations, so a brief description of each will follow.

Relief Theory

This is primarily a psychological/physiological theory of comedy. One of the most
important proponents of the relief theory is Sigmund Freud. His primary work on the
subject is found in his Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. In this work, Freud
essentially argues that through laughter we release pent up psychic energies that are
normally held in reserve. This is a gross oversimplification, but most versions of the relief
theory are similarly concerned with the release of tension and the psychological basis and
benefit of humor and laughter. Besides not adequately dealing with the difference between
comedy and laughter, Freud’s theory is intentionally limited in its scope and does not claim
to address all comic or humorous issues. A more modern version of this theory put forward by Koch is described thus: “With the comic, […] we are led from a state of high arousal (intellectual and emotional alarm) to one of relief” (48). This description obviously emphasizes the psychological and physical connection of humor and how the theory attempts to describe comedy as a release or a coping mechanism.

There are some advantages to using a psychologically based theory of comedy, because there is obviously a psychological component to comedy. There is something that is pleasant about comedy and in that sense it is its own reward and serves a useful purpose. As interesting as some of the explorations along these lines are in terms of cognitive development and the psychological and neurological workings of comedy, for the most part the utility of this theory falls outside of the scope of this project. We are here interested more specifically with the structural creation of comedy in the arts and must, of necessity, leave aside some of the physiological and psychological aspects of this complex phenomenon. We will tangentially touch upon some aspects of the relief theory, but for the most part, we will turn our attention elsewhere.

**Superiority Theory**

The superiority theory is essentially a social theory of comedy. The roots of the theory go back to Aristotle and Plato and their ideas that comedy depicts a lower kind of action or character. In our social existence, we are in a constant struggle with others for available resources, advancement, etc. When we are in a position of superiority, this gives us a sense of joy or pleasure often expressed in laughter. Thomas Hobbes, one of the major superiority theorists describes this experience as follows:
I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonor. It is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over. (qtd. in Morreall, *Philosophy* 20)

One of the major problems of the superiority theory is that it often conflates laughter with comedy which, as has been discussed, is a problematic assumption. An additional problem with the superiority theory is that it can only convincingly explain a rather small subset of comedy. Although attempts have been made to develop the theory to describe comedy in a broader perspective, these are largely unsuccessful in verbal and visual humor to state just two obvious examples. Gruner, a dedicated proponent of the superiority theory, provides numerous such examples that are ultimately unconvincing. One here will suffice. “To summarize: creators of puns and punning riddles do so in order to ‘defeat’ their targets/publics with brilliant verbal exhibitionism. [. . .] Puns are wordplay. [. . .] And play must involve a winner and a loser, or it isn’t much fun. Otherwise, why do we always keep score?” (Gruner 145-6). Although Gruner argues that this sense of conflict still exists in wordplay, even though the original context that created it disappears, he fails to adequately explain why puns, and verbal jokes that are not focused on relationships of power between people still remain funny outside of the immediate context of their creation.
Despite its rather significant limitations, the superiority theory has enjoyed a great deal of popularity in philosophical thought. Grawe argues that this is because scholars keep returning to Aristotle and his somewhat limited and incomplete theory of comedy (5). Even with these limitations, the superiority theory is useful in describing some forms of humor, and is frequently helpful in describing the degree of the reaction of a person who is personally affected or involved in the comedy producing event. A somewhat idiosyncratic form of the superiority theory, found in the writings of Henri Bergson, will be developed later in this chapter to showcase some of the utility of this theory and how it can be compared with the incongruity theory.

**Incongruity Theory**

The incongruity theory has been described as simply a linguistic theory (Mulder and Nijholt 4), but it can be more appropriately viewed as a cognitive theory of comedy (Morreall, Seriously 15). While various elaborations of this theory have their individual problems and there are some facets of comedy that incongruity theory has difficulty in explaining (such as why repetition of jokes can be funny), it is still widely used in humor research. With a couple of idiosyncratic exceptions (see Gruner and Latta), the majority of modern scholars believe that at least some form of incongruity is present in most comedy.

While various forms and manifestations of incongruity theory will be developed in this and the following chapter, some introductory notes here are in order. Incongruity involves experiencing two or more conflicting mental or cognitive concepts at one time. Morreall describes this as follows: “We live in an orderly world, where we have come to
expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn’t fit into these patterns” (Seriously 15-6). Morreall suggests that this is necessarily related to the element of surprise (Works 26), but as we will see over the course of this study, surprise is often a factor in comedy, but not a necessary and sufficient condition for it.

Many modern versions of incongruity theory insist that there must be an element of resolution for humor to be effective (Attardo 143). These are frequently called Incongruity-Resolution Theories. The resolution of the incongruity, requires that people “get it” for the comedy to be effective. More modern versions of the theory have also emphasized the idea that the subject must be in some way involved in the experience for it to be funny. “Humor can occur wherever we have expectations. But it seems to work best where the expectations are about things that are important to us. That’s why most comedy plays off expectations about things like cleanliness, hostility, and sex” (Morreall, Works 29). These topics are important to us and so they get our attention and up the ante, so to speak, of our involvement.

Incongruity does not automatically produce comedy or humor. For instance, even though we need some involvement with the subject, the enjoyment of incongruity does not take place when we are too involved in what is going on. It is much easier to laugh at someone who trips and falls in a comical fashion than it is to laugh at ourselves in the same situation. Because we suffer the immediate and often painful consequences of that fall, it becomes more difficult to enjoy the incongruity of the experience. James Beattie suggested that fear, pity, moral disapproval, indignation, and disgust all interfere with our
ability to appreciate incongruity (Morreall, Seriously 19). As with other theories of comedy, this theory is one that has its limitations, and complexities, that are not always immediately or easily resolved.

Many scholars have written about comedy describing what could be considered to fall under the general rubric of incongruity theory. Plato for instance included a description of laughable images. Shelly summarizes and comments on Plato’s description:

Images that mix appropriate and inappropriate elements are laughable. He thinks particularly of musicians who set masculine lyrics to feminine tunes or choreographers who have human characters perform the movements of animals. In modern terms, we might think of a story about the warlike Achilles wearing a dress. (Shelley 357)

While, as discussed earlier, Plato’s work would fall generally under the superiority theory (certainly the Greeks would look down on humans behaving as animals or the masculine parading in feminine dress), there is an element here that emphasizes how incongruity is involved in this process. Francis Hutcheson also weighed in on the topic of incongruity in social terms:

That then which seems generally the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea: this contrast between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection, and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity, seems to be the very spirit of burlesque; and the greatest part of our raillery and jest is founded upon it. (qtd. in Morreall, Philosophy 32)
It is important to note here not only Hutcheson’s description of the differences or incongruities in the creation of comedy, but also the importance that Hutcheson attaches to “some resemblance in the principle idea.” This will be an idea that will be developed in more depth in the next chapter.

Hegel’s theory of comedy is also one that falls under the general category of incongruity. In particular his comparison of comedy to tragedy is of interest. Roche states, “Hegel’s typology of comedy is, if briefer, more complex than his typology of tragedy. In his more general reflections, Hegel asserts the importance of subjectivity, contradictions, and the need for a comic resolution” (136). Incongruity fits in nicely with Hegel’s dialectic approach to philosophical thought, which requires two antithetical positions or situations. Roche describes this process in Hegelian terms:

As in all dialectical progressions, the thesis and the synthesis contain the primary moment, the antithesis the secondary moment: the primary moment in comedy is reconciliation or contingency harmonized; the antithetical moment is the elevation of subjectivity. Recognizing comedy as an antithetical genre, Hegel comments at length on the antithetical elevation of subjectivity. [. . .] Comedy functions as an aesthetic analogue to Hegel’s practice of immanent critique, by which the philosopher seeks to unveil self-contradictory and thus self-cancelling positions. (139)

Hegelian thought then suggests that the form of comedy itself, is incongruous, or perhaps more appropriately antithetical. That is, comedy is defined not so much as by what it is, but rather what it is reacting to or against. While each of these approaches to the
incongruity theory is helpful for understanding its various aspects, the figure who has most contributed to this theory is Arthur Schopenhauer. Because of his significance in the development of this theory and the importance of this theory, it will be necessary to spend some time examining his writings in detail.

Arthur Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer’s theories of comedy are found primarily in his work The World as Will and Representation, published in 1818. His theories on comedy are only a small portion of his writings in this philosophical work. Despite the relative brevity of his sections dealing with the ludicrous (his word for comedy), he has a logically consistent, if not particularly encompassing definition of humor.

Schopenhauer considers the problem of the origin of laughter an ancient one. He states that it was recognized by Cicero, “but was at once given up as insoluble” (Representation 2: 91). Schopenhauer, himself, presents a view that is based on the concept of the ludicrous. His theories comprise two major categories or species of the ludicrous. The first type in Schopenhauer’s words, is “the origin of the ludicrous is always the paradoxical, and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in other respects heterogeneous to it” (Representation 2: 91). In other words, the origin of the ludicrous has to do with a concept or object, suddenly and paradoxically being categorized or subsumed into a category that is ostensibly dissimilar.

Although Schopenhauer initially refuses to give examples of what he means because “it is so simple and comprehensible that it does not require them” (Idea 1: 77), he later recants in order “to come to the aid of the mental inertness of those readers who
always prefer to remain in a passive state” (Representation 2: 92). The first example that he gives proves to be one of the most problematic issues of his theory of comedy.

Schopenhauer states:

Bearing in mind that for an angle two lines meeting each other are required which when produced intersect each other; that the tangent, on the other hand, touches the circle only at one point, but at this point really runs parallel to it; and if we thus have present in our mind the abstract conviction of the impossibility of an angle between the circumference of a circle and the tangent, but yet have such an angle visibly before us on paper, all this will easily make us smile. (Representation 2: 92)

This example, rather than supporting his point, seems to illustrate one of its major limitations. Schopenhauer has shown that humor and laughter are somewhat limited by culture and experience without really accounting for that idea in his theory. Smith describes this very example that Schopenhauer uses and critiques its value for the study of humor. “If such laughter exists, and we admit that it may among certain metaphysicians of the German school, it has no place in comedy, save as an example itself of humorous pedantry” (53). Indeed, this very example is ludicrous in that it subsumes the concept of a tangent to a circle into the concept of humor. The apparent paradox or incongruity of this example causes modern readers of Schopenhauer to experience the sensation of the ludicrous.

The second type of the ludicrous Schopenhauer describes as one going “in the opposite direction, namely from the abstract concept to the real thing of perception that is
thought through this concept. But this real thing now brings to light any incongruity with the concept which was overlooked; and in this way there arises an absurdity, and consequently in practice a foolish action” (Representation 2: 96). The following example that Schopenhauer provides, in this case, is helpful in illustrating his meaning. One person said that he liked to walk alone, to which another responded, “You like to walk alone; so do I; then we can walk together” (Representation 2: 96). Two people who like to do the same thing should be able to enjoy it together, but in this case the concept becomes ridiculous, because it subsumes or includes in the concept a condition that excludes its possibility. The thing that the two people enjoy doing excludes the possibility of them doing it together.

Perhaps the simplest way of describing Schopenhauer’s concept of the ludicrous lies in the tension or dichotomy of what is conceived and what is perceived. When our expectations do not match the reality of our experience, this produces an incongruous juxtaposition of elements. Schopenhauer describes this phenomenon:

In the case of that suddenly appearing contrast between the perceived and the conceived, the perceived is always undoubtedly in the right, for it is in no way subject to error, and needs no confirmation from outside, but is its own advocate. Its conflict with what is thought springs ultimately from the fact that the latter, with its abstract concepts, cannot come down to the infinite multifariousness and fine shades of what is perceived. This triumph of knowledge of perception over thought gives us pleasure. [. . .] It must therefore be delightful for us to see this strict, untiring, and most
troublesome governess, our faculty of reason, for once convicted of inadequacy. (Representation 2: 98)

This is an interesting comment on the relationship of thought and reason to humor. Schopenhauer seems to indicate, in this statement, what is perhaps the origin of the subversive nature of much of humor. It is a rebellion against the reason or rational thought that is in control of the mind and we take pleasure in that escape from the authority of logic.

Schopenhauer assumes that only he could come up with the answer to the age old problem of laughter and humor. He rather condescendingly refuses to demonstrate the incorrectness of other philosophers such as Kant and Jean-Paul in their theories of the ludicrous as obviously inadequate (Representation 2: 91). Although his theory proves to be important for understanding some aspects of comedy, this is the same accusation that will be leveled against him by future philosophers and comedic theorists. To continue our exploration of comedy, we will need to look into the writings of French philosopher, Henri Bergson.

**Henri Bergson**

Bergson published his essay entitled *Laughter* in 1900, some 82 years after Schopenhauer’s discussion of the ludicrous. Although this topic is a significant departure from the mass of Bergson’s work, the purpose of the essay is to deal with comedy and laughter, although he does touch on art and aesthetics within the context of the essay. In this essay, he explicates a much more elaborate explanation of comedy that covers numerous examples. Although it is complex and carefully thought out and argued, it is
also too narrow in its attempts to define comedy. It is largely an example of a superiority theory, as will be discussed later, but also exemplifies some characteristics of the incongruity theory. Bergson is careful to state that he is not attempting to be prescriptive in his analysis of comedy (74), nevertheless, his structure could be considered guilty of being too rigid and mechanical in his description of all comedy as a result of “Something mechanical being encrusted on the living” (84).

Bergson sets up his problem much in the same way as Schopenhauer did, referring to the historical problem of comedy and laughter. “The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation” (61). While his purpose is similar to Schopenhauer’s, his tone is much more playful, and in this passage he hints at the mechanical rigidity that he believes is the source of humor.

Bergson’s central metaphor seems to be a product of the industrial and mechanical era in which he was writing. His model of laughter and humor is one that is essentially mechanical. He describes it as a “mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being” (67). Indeed, the rest of his theory can be extrapolated from this basic principle. Bergson elaborates on how this applies to people by stating: “The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” (79). When a person continues to function mechanically by doing the same thing, despite changing conditions, then this to Bergson is what makes the situation laughable. A
textbook example of this theory in action is found in Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. Chaplin’s character is working on a mechanical assembly line and his task is to tighten nuts with two wrenches. His character becomes numbed by the work and continues to try to tighten everything in sight and still keeps working even when he is caught up in the cogs of a giant machine. According to Bergson’s theory, this produces laughter because he is acting mechanically, just like the machines that Chaplin is satirizing, despite the changing circumstances that make his actions no longer appropriate.

Another facet of this theory is found in Bergson’s understanding of absentmindedness. Absentmindedness (being without a mind) is a reflection of the mechanical on a human being. A human being, without thinking, functions by habit and does things that are no longer appropriate for the circumstances. For Bergson, this is comical: “Absentmindedness is always comical. Indeed, the deeper the absentmindedness the higher the comedy” (155). An example of how this absentmindedness is comical might include the scenario of a man coming home from work. He is preoccupied, and as he enters the door he hangs his hat and coat, as he always does, on the hall tree in the foyer. Because he is absentminded, he does not realize that his hat and coat have fallen to the floor because the furniture in the room has been rearranged. This is a clear example of how the man continues to behave like a machine, out of habit, because he is absentminded or preoccupied with something else.

This mechanical basis of humor is not confined merely to the individual, but nature and society also fall under the definition Bergson sets forth in this theory of comedy. Bergson states, “A mechanical element introduced into nature and an automatic regulation
of society, such, then, are the two types of laughable effects” (90). He goes on to elaborate that this becomes humorous when there is “a human regulation of affairs usurping the place of the laws of nature” (91). For instance, in the Marx Brothers’ film Duck Soup, Groucho becomes the leader of a small country and outlines his new rules. He immediately outlaws things like whistling and chewing gum. He goes on and sings the lines: “If any form of pleasure is exhibited, report to me and it will be prohibited.” Whereas Bergson would see this as Groucho acting in a mechanical way and banning things when they are clearly outside of the realm of human laws, Schopenhauer would point out that the incongruity of a government trying to counter-legislate something that is second nature to humans, like pleasure, is patently absurd and therefore humorous.

Although for Bergson this lack of logical thought or unthinking mechanical behavior is the source of comedy, comedy itself follows certain logical rules. “For the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness” (62). A recognition of the existence of this logical set of rules appears to be necessary for us to understand comedy and experience laughter. Bergson is clear to point out that emotion and laughter are mutually exclusive and therefore comedy’s “appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple” (63-4). Because the appeal of the comic is intellectual in nature, Bergson argues that this puts laughter exclusively in the domain of humans (62). Bergson makes an interesting comment on this idea. He states, “It is strange that so important a fact, and such a simple one too, has not attracted to a greater degree the attention of philosophers” (62). This is interesting because Schopenhauer did in fact comment on this specific issue for the same reasons as Bergson. “Because of the lack of
the faculty of reason, and thus of the lack of universal concepts, the animal is incapable of laughter as well as of speech. Laughter is therefore a prerogative and characteristic of man” (Schopenhauer *Representation* 2: 98). By denying the idea that animals can experience laughter because of their lack of reason, both Bergson and Schopenhauer reinforce the idea that comedy must have a logical or rational framework.

Although this logical infrastructure is necessary to understand comedy, Bergson points out that the rules are not always hard and fast. In describing his definition of the comic he states, “It is suitable only for cases that are elementary, theoretical and perfect, in which the comic is free from all adulteration” (74). In practice, the definition of the comic is much more ethereal than fits neatly into Bergson’s theory of the comic. He admits the limitations of his theory in describing this ancient problem of comedy. “Our excuse for attacking the problem in our turn must lie in the fact that we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing” (61). Lacey suggests that Bergson “exaggerated the rigidity of his rules for clarity of exposition” (195). Indeed, some of his rules seem to be suspiciously similar to those proposed by Schopenhauer, although it is unclear whether he would have recognized or admitted the similarities.

On the surface, Bergson is critical of incongruity theories believing them to be inadequate. Although he does not mention Schopenhauer specifically, it is a critique that does implicitly address Schopenhauer’s theory of the ludicrous. He describes how he thinks this theory came to be as a result of something that can be interpreted simultaneously in two different ways:
It is natural that certain philosophers should have been specially struck by this mental instability, and that some of them should regard the very essence of the ludicrous as consisting in the collision or coincidence of two judgments that contradict each other. Their definition, however, is far from meeting every case, and even when it does, it defines—not the principle of the ludicrous, but only one of its more or less distant consequences. (123-4)

Bergson believes that incongruity theories describe the symptoms of the ludicrous rather than the ludicrous itself. It would be like describing someone with bronchitis as suffering from a cough. It is an accurate description of the problem, but is inadequate in describing what is really going on. Bergson, in discussing absurdity, says, “It does not create the comic; rather, we might say that the comic infuses into it its own particular essence. It is not a cause but an effect—an effect of a very special kind, which reflects the special nature of its cause” (178). He cites an example that he thinks incongruity theories are inadequate in describing. “Why is it there is something comic in the repetition of a word on the stage? No theory of the ludicrous seems to offer a satisfactory answer to this very simple question” (107). This is one of the areas of comedy that Bergson thinks is problematic for incongruity theories.

Critics have cited the limitations of Bergson’s philosophy of comedy in the same way that Bergson felt that previous philosophers’ comedic theories were limited. Complaints about his theory have ranged from critiques on his ideas of the social function of laughter (Mast 3), to the absence of feeling in comedy (Lacey 191). He has been
criticized for being unable to deal adequately with verbal humor, wordplay, and nonsense (Atkinson 13) and even had his entire theory declared invalid on the basis that it is neither objective enough to be a realistic theory nor scientific enough to be a psychological theory (Feibleman 129). Despite this criticism, his theory is still widely used for the light that it does shine on comedy.

The Ludicrous and the Mechanical

In order to lay down some of the important groundwork for our further development of comedy, we will now examine, in some detail, some of the intersections and divergences of the writings of Schopenhauer and Bergson. Although significantly divergent in the analysis and representation of comedy in their philosophical works, Arthur Schopenhauer and Henri Bergson share certain ideas on the theory of comedy. Even though they ostensibly belong to two different schools of philosophical comic theory which are essentially non-compatible, they do converge on several interesting points, providing insight into issues such as the purpose of laughter, the relation of the comic to reason, and the origin and function of wit and puns. Although both Schopenhauer and Bergson’s theories on comedy are ultimately inadequate in dealing with all the complexities of comedy, they do provide useful insights into the philosophical theory of comedy and the purpose of laughter and allow us to lay down some of the theoretical groundwork from which we can develop a semiotic theory of comedy.

In spite of his overt criticism of incongruity theories, there are some striking similarities between Bergson’s and Schopenhauer’s views on the ludicrous. Instead of describing the ludicrous as a conflict between opposing ideas, Bergson states, “The
reciprocal interference of two sets of ideas in the same sentence is an inexhaustible source of amusing varieties” (138). Although Bergson continues to describe things in mechanical or scientific terms, he seems to be saying something very similar to what Schopenhauer is saying. Indeed at times it seems that he is paraphrasing Schopenhauer. Bergson says, “A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time” (123). The parallels between this statement and Schopenhauer’s description of the ludicrous as “the paradoxical, and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in other respects heterogeneous to it” (Representation 2: 91) are obvious.

Even some of Bergson’s more central concepts in his theory of laughter are foreshadowed in Schopenhauer’s writings. Schopenhauer makes a statement which would seem not out of place in Bergson’s theory:

The incongruity then between the concept and reality soon shows itself here, and it becomes evident that the former never condescends to the particular case, and that with its generality and rigid definiteness it can never accurately apply to the fine distinctions of difference and innumerable modifications of the actual. (Idea 1: 78)

Here Schopenhauer describes incongruity as a rigidness that does not allow it to apply to the actual world or the reality of life. Bergson’s own writings on the subject are remarkably similar. “In the first place, this view of the mechanical and the living dovetailed into each other makes us incline towards the vaguer image of some rigidity or other applied to the mobility of life, in an awkward attempt to follow its lines and
counterfeit its suppleness’ (85). Bergson seems to owe Schopenhauer a greater debt than is immediately obvious. Glasgow, in his analysis of comedy, attempts to reconcile these two theories.

Like Schopenhauer, he [Bergson] sees the target of laughter as a rigidity that distorts the fluidity of real life, a mask that—by over-simplification—wars and contorts the dynamic reality. Whereas for Schopenhauer it is a conceptual rigidity that has this effect (in his theory of the ridiculous), for Bergson it is a mechanical rigidity, the predictable tendency to repetition that is characteristic of behavioral fixation. (366)

They both view the same issue in essentially the same terms, except that they approach the problem from the overall concept of their philosophical systems. Schopenhauer associates this rigidity with the idea or concept, and Bergson associates this rigidity with the mechanical.

One point on which Schopenhauer and Bergson differ significantly is their understanding of the purpose of laughter. Schopenhauer defines laughter in very specific terms. “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” (Idea 1: 76). For Schopenhauer, laughter is the method through which humans express pleasure at the ludicrous and it is closely related to joy (Representation 2: 98). Laughter for Schopenhauer is directed. “Now the concepts whose evident incongruity with perception moves us to laughter are either those of another, or they are our own. In the first case, we
laugh at the other person; in the second case, we feel a surprise, often agreeable, or at any rate amusing” (Representational 2: 98). Schopenhauer’s conception of laughter is limited by his conception of the comic as a conflict between the conceived and perceived. Smith questions the capacity of Schopenhauer’s theory to address all areas of comedy. “It is to be questioned whether this explanation accounts for much more than the laughter at jokes; laughter in which the rationalizing process is obvious” (46). He argues that Schopenhauer’s theory does not adequately account for other types of laughter, such as laughter at repetition, which by definition does not have the surprise necessary for the sudden tension of contrasting incongruities (47). Smith also says that it does not account for laughter at characters themselves (47). While Schopenhauer does not appear to have any explanation for laughter for this latter category, this problem is explained handily by Bergson’s theory of laughter.

Bergson’s theory of laughter is in many ways a radical departure from previous incongruity theories, like those of Schopenhauer. He describes these as being incapable of explaining why the comic causes laughter: “Hence those definitions which tend to make the comic into an abstract relation between ideas: ‘an intellectual contrast,’ ‘a patent absurdity,’ etc., definitions which, even were they really suitable to every form of the comic, would not in the least explain why the comic makes us laugh” (65). Bergson attempts to create a more encompassing definition of the comic and explain why it makes us laugh.

Bergson sums up his own theory in quite succinct terms: “This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective” (74). In order to unpack or expand on this theory of
the comic, it is important to realize that Bergson’s own concept of laughter is not merely a physiological response to a stimulus or a result of conceptual conflict in our minds. His theory of laughter is, essentially, a social one. “Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness” (187). Laughter is a social corrective for Bergson; it is always directed at someone or something that is not behaving according to the social norms. In this sense, it is a training technique that provides negative stimulus when people do not behave as they ought. “It makes us at once endeavour to appear what we ought to be” (Bergson 71). Because we put ourselves in a superior position to others in terms of their social incorrectness, this clearly falls under the category of a superiority theory.

The practical application of Bergson’s theory of laughter is intimately related to his concept of the comic. It is invariably the result of the mechanical affecting the living. “We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing” (97). It is the lack of humanity in a person, when that person is behaving like a machine, that requires the person to be socially corrected. There is a division between those who create comedy on purpose and those who inadvertently are comical. “Henri Bergson separates those who celebrate the life force (and are therefore the makers of comedy) from those who impose a mechanical rigidity on the free flow of experience (and thereby qualify as the butts of comedy)” (Charney 161). In the former case, the creator of comedy is using an ability to create and is exploiting the mechanical to entertain. The latter person is one who because
of his or her own rigidity or inability to relate to changing circumstances, needs the social corrective of laughter.

Bergson draws a line between what faults in others make us laugh. For instance, he suggests that we laugh at the faults of others, but not faults of immorality. Instead it is their unsociability that makes us laugh (Bergson 150). This reinforces the idea of laughter as a socially normalizing tool. Bergson states that “laughter has no greater foe than emotion” (63) because of the harshly corrective nature of laughter. If a person empathizes with the object of laughter, then that empathy will not allow the person to harshly judge or correct the person through laughter. This would necessitate that audiences have no empathy with the object of their laughter, a problematic assumption at best. In addition, as Lacey points out, Bergson’s theory requires “that we must be laughing at someone and not simply at a joke” (194). This is another limit on Bergson’s otherwise largely inclusive theory of comedy.

A comparison among a couple of specific forms of humor will be helpful in elucidating the similarities and differences in the comic aesthetics and theories of these two philosophers. One type of humor that both philosophers address and attempt to explain is wit. Bergson’s definition of wit is somewhat amorphous. It is based in language (as opposed to physical comedy), but beyond that his own definition appears to be contradictory. Bergson states: “Here it seems as though we should draw an important distinction between the witty [. . .] and the comic. A word is said to be comic when it makes us laugh at the person who utters it, and witty when it makes us laugh either at a third party or at ourselves” (128). He makes a very clear definition here and then
immediately says something that calls into question the validity of making this distinction. “But in most cases we can hardly make up our minds whether the word is comic or witty. All that we can say is that it is laughable” (128). For Bergson this definition does not, in the final analysis, seem to be that important.

Schopenhauer also defines wit in opposition to something else, specifically folly. For Schopenhauer wit “must always show itself in words” (Idea 1: 78) and folly generally shows itself in actions (Idea 1: 78). Wit is purposeful in nature. It requires a creative act in its production. Schopenhauer, in describing this faculty says that “wit as a mental faculty consists entirely in the facility for finding for every object that presents itself a concept under which it can certainly be thought, although it is very different from all the other objects that come under that concept” (Representation 2: 96). Wit then is a journey from a perception in the real world to conception (Representation 2: 92). This tension between the perceived and the conceived, or the ludicrous, is created when the person takes a perceived object and then brings it under a new and contradictory conception. Since wit is a purposeful creation of the ludicrous for humorous purposes, it is, therefore, closely related to the joke in Schopenhauer’s philosophy of the comic (Representation 2: 99). Both are purposeful manifestations of the ludicrous for comic purposes.

Another interesting area of comparison between the two philosophers is found in their descriptions of the pun. Schopenhauer introduces the pun by comparing it to the witticism. “Just as the witticism brings two very different real objects under one concept, the pun brings two different concepts, by the assistance of accident, under one word” (Idea 1: 79). The reason that Schopenhauer uses the term “accident” is not to imply that a
pun is necessarily unintentional, but rather stems from an “accident of nomenclature” (Idea 1: 79). The pun then is of the same nature of the witticism, with the difference being that it is the result of, and peculiar to language where two unlike concepts are placed into conflict with each other because they sound alike and are therefore equated.

Bergson’s own definition of the pun seems to fit remarkably well within Schopenhauer’s theory of the ludicrous. “In the pun, the same sentence appears to offer two independent meanings, but it is only an appearance; in reality there are two different sentences made up of different words, but claiming to be one and the same because both have the same sound” (138). Although Bergson refers to this conflict between two unlike concepts by using the mechanistic term “reciprocal interference” (138), it is essentially the same as Schopenhauer’s concept of the pun.

For Bergson, the pun is closely related to word play. They are merely degrees of the same philosophical concept. In word play “we are confronted with only one series of words; but advantage is taken of the different meanings a word may have, especially when used figuratively instead of literally” (139). An example from the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* is illustrative of how this functions in practice. Groucho’s character says to Chico’s character, “I’ve got a good mind to join a club and beat you over the head with it.” Here according to Bergson’s theory, the humor in the pun results from the mechanical use of the word in two different concepts so that, at the word “club,” the meaning of the sentence changes from a figurative to a more literal sense. “Club” initially is used to refer to an organized group of people joining themselves for some purpose, but changes in meaning, by the end of the sentence, to a more literal or mechanical interpretation of the
term referring to a heavy blunt wooden object that can be used as a weapon.

Schopenhauer would view it somewhat differently. He would explain the humor as a result of the conflict between the two incompatible ideas that were joined together under one concept through an accidental similarity in the word that describes them. Both of these interpretations explain why it is funny although they arrive at this conclusion from different philosophical and theoretical approaches.

Despite the fundamental differences that divide the comedic theories of Schopenhauer and Bergson, there is much in their application that is similar. Both of their systems are too limited to describe all the modern examples of comedy, but they do manage to shed light on the philosophical aesthetic of many comedic ideas or practices. These competing theories provide additional insight into the complexity of comedy. In some cases, the same comic phenomenon can be described as funny for two very different reasons. This indicates that comedy is something quite complex that can sometimes defy even complex philosophical analyses. Through a semiotic approach to these same problems, I hope to show that both theories help us in ultimately understanding how comedy is created on various levels of signification. While Schopenhauer and Bergson might disagree on why something is funny, it seems fairly certain that they would both still laugh at it because they both understand some of the meaning making processes involved in creating comedy.

**Tragedy and Comedy**

I want to spend a few moments here making some general observations about tragedy and comedy. I hope that this, like the rest of the chapter will ground us in our
exploration of comedy and help us keep the larger picture in mind before we delve too deeply into the minutiae of how comedy is created. We will briefly mention tragedy as our point of departure and our reference point against which much of comedy defines itself. We are not here strictly limited to thinking about tragedy or comedy as dramatic forms, but should extend our approach to include the serious, the normal, or the usual and comedy in its broadest sense. Grawe makes an interesting comparison between tragedy and comedy indicating their structure and purposes. “Roughly, tragedy asserts humanity’s moral dimension, often going on to assert that a person’s morality may make it impossible for him to keep living. Tragedy repeatedly asserts that there are situations in which humanity’s ‘higher nature’ forces us to take action, even when such action must end in our own demise” (16). Tragedy has inherent in it the idea that, because man is unable to follow a higher law or live up to his highest ideals, he is doomed to failure, often ending with the hopelessness of death. Grawe then goes on to describe how he views the purpose and role of comedy: “Comedy’s basic message is that the human race will survive, that it is destined to carry on. [. . .] Put somewhat more rigorously, comedy as seen from a formal perspective is the representation of life patterned to demonstrate or to assert a faith in human survival, often including or emphasizing how that survival is possible or under what conditions that survival takes place” (17). It is no wonder that comedy enjoys such popularity. Life and survival are messages that people want to hear, and judging by the success of comedies during serious and deadly times, such as the great depression and World War II, perhaps it is something that we need to hear. It is important to remember that the message of survival is not necessarily a happy ending (Silk 94). Of the
relationship between tragedy and comedy Schopenhauer states:

If we have found the tendency and ultimate intention of tragedy to be a denial of the will to live, we shall easily recognize in its opposite, comedy, the incitement to the continued assertion of the will. It is true that comedy, like every representation of life without exception, must bring before our eyes suffering and adversity; but it represents it to us as passing, resolving itself into joy, in general mingled with success, victory, and hopes, which in the end predominate. Thus in the end it declares that life as a whole is thoroughly good. (qtd. in Smith 165)

As we have seen, comedy and tragedy come from the same source of human experience and as such, often are so closely intertwined that they become difficult to disentangle.

One of the ways to distinguish the two forms is to examine their areas of focus, or what they tend to depict. Tragedy is concerned primarily with the individual, while comedy is concerned with society as a whole (Grawe 6). This ties in nicely with the idea that tragedy focuses on death while comedy focuses on life. The individual, must of necessity die, but society continues to procreate and to live on generation after generation. Umberto Eco points out an unusual, perhaps even incongruous, result of this division. He states, “The tragic (and the dramatic)–it is said–are universal. At a distance of centuries we still grieve at the tribulations of Oedipus and Orestes, and even without sharing the ideology of Homais we are distressed by the tragedy of Emma Bovary. The comic, on the other hand, seems bound to its time, society, cultural anthropology” (Eco, Travels 269).

On one hand, tragedy deals with the individual, but, at the same time, it is universal, and
on the other hand, comedy broadly deals with all of society, but is more specific to its time and place. Comedy has the power to show us truth, and I think that this incongruity, as difficult as it initially seems to be to resolve, exemplifies this quality of comedy. Tragedy often focuses on the death of an individual. We experience life as individuals, and we all live under the specter of the inevitability of our own death, from the time when we acquire enough cognitive ability to understand the concept. Because each of us experiences this as an individual, it is universal. We all know what it is like to be in such a position, and because we have this experience, we do not need any explanations from others to “get it.” We know how it works because it is a part of our own lives. By the same token, even though comedy deals with society as a whole and has a broad reach, it is limited to its time, place, and culture. Life continues on, as comedy suggests (often through a marriage at the end), not in the individual, but in a society. The only constant in society is change. Thus, because new life is what continues, it changes society, it changes its rules, its beliefs, its cultures, and its ways of making meaning. This is why we do not laugh at many of the jokes of Aristophanes, unless we have a degree in classics. This is why only Schopenhauer and his ilk could think that a tangent to a circle could be a real knee-slapper. Comedy often requires an elaborate knowledge of the surrounding signifying systems to understand what is being said and why the way that it is said is funny. This is how comedy can be so broad and universal in appeal, and at the same time, be so narrow in its chronological frame of reference.

Finally, we must recognize that comedy and tragedy, for all their differences, have much that is in common, and are, in many ways, connected. Like tragedy, comedy often
has something serious to say: “comedy has its own grave insights and implications, whether in alliance with and within the bounds of tragedy, or on its own independent ground” (Merchant 80). Merchant also states that from its earliest days comedy and tragedy were intertwined even in dramatic form. “The Greek theatre is usually perfectly happy to mix tragedy with comedy and with deliberate, contrived and subtle effects” (14). Merchant goes on to describe several examples of the comic in the context of the tragedies of Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles showing how closely the two forms have always been related (16). Even the very basis of tragedy has been described in terms that are very similar to the way we defined comedy through the incongruity theory. Frye states that: “the incongruous and the inevitable, [. . .] are combined in tragedy” (42). Smith, while affirming the basic division between tragedy and comedy as movements towards death and life respectively, describes tragedy also in familiar terms. “Tragedy springs from the clash of irreconcilable elements in life” (165). Both comedy and tragedy seem to thrive on an incongruous juxtaposition of elements.

One of the differences between the two, perhaps, lies in how the two different approaches view the world and the rules that make it up. Tragedy is the ultimate reaffirmation of the rules. Oedipus swears that he will punish the man who killed the king. When he discovers that it is, indeed, he who is guilty of the crime, he follows the rules and suffers the wrath of his inevitable fate. Comedy, on the other hand, metaphorically sticks its tongue out at rules and fate. Comedy is subversive. It does not obey the rules; it changes them, flouts them, or just ignores them. Comedy does not feel the need to follow Aristotelian rules of structure, development, and resolution. Perhaps comedy itself played
a joke on history, by destroying Aristotle’s lost book of Poetics, which had tried to trap it inside a narrowly defined definition.

Comedy prefers to see the world in a different way. Instead of seeing the rules as the vertical bars of a prison cell, it turns its head ninety degrees and sees the bars as the horizontal steps of a ladder to climb out of the trap that life, society, and the rules have set for it. Perhaps Frye describes this quality of comedy best when he discusses Dante’s The Divine Comedy, he describes the pivotal scene for our purposes thus:

But on the other side of this blasted world of repulsiveness and idiocy, a world without pity and without hope, satire begins again. At the bottom of Dante’s hell, which is also the center of the spherical earth, Dante sees Satan standing upright in the circle of ice, and as he cautiously follows Virgil over the hip and thigh of the evil giant, letting himself down by the tufts of hair on his skin, he passes the center and finds himself no longer going down but going up, climbing out on the other side of the world to see the stars again. From this point of view, the devil is no longer upright, but standing on his head, in the same attitude in which he was hurled downward from heaven upon the other side of the earth. Tragedy and tragic irony take us into a hell of narrowing circles and culminate in some such vision of the source of all evil in a personal form. Tragedy can take us no farther; but if we persevere with the mythos of irony and satire, we shall pass a dead center, and finally see the gentlemanly Prince of Darkness bottom side up. (Frye 239)
The Comic Aesthetic

To end our exploration of the philosophical origins of comedy we now turn to a brief examination of comedy as an aesthetic phenomenon. There is a beauty inherent in comedy. If it were not so, we would not have such intense emotional and cognitive responses to it. In other words, if there was not something in comedy that appealed to our artistic senses, then we would not go to such great lengths to craft comedy into the myriad of artistic forms in which it appears or to seek it out as spectators. Martin argues that amusement (or appreciation of the comic) is, in many ways, equivalent to the aesthetic experience and points out a distinction that can be drawn here between amusement and aesthetic appreciation of art and amusement and aesthetic appreciation of non-artistic objects or events such as human behavior and natural objects (80-1). This is an important distinction since there are many things that we find to be funny or amusing that would not fall under the category of art or that do not have a purposive origin. Obviously, for the purposes of this exploration, we are interested primarily in the aesthetic appreciation of comedy as a response to various art forms, but it is important to remember that this approach is not holistic and omits, for the most part, the natural occurrence of comedy. In chapter two, as we develop a semiotic approach to the arts, it will be important to remember, however, that much of the creation of semiotic meaning is independent of intent, and can be applied equally to artistic and non-artistic comic examples.

To return to our discussion of the appreciation of comedy as an aesthetic phenomenon, it is important to mention some of the similarities between the appreciation of comedy and an aesthetic appreciation of any work of art. Martin in his article “Humor
and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities,” persuasively argues that both amusement and aesthetic appreciation help us to see objects in new or unusual ways, allowing us to enrich our worlds. He also points out that comedy and its aesthetic enjoyment can be a painful experience (81). Comedy is often biting and critical, and just because we laugh at the comic, does not mean that it is necessarily light or frivolous. Martin also states:

The responses of amusement and aesthetic appreciation are equally matters of taste, and in both the subjective and objective senses of ‘taste’. On the one hand, aesthetic experiences involve objective discrimination and perceptiveness of properties like unity, gracefulness, tension-and incongruity. This discrimination is an achievement, unlike the mere ability to perceive colours, lines, and sounds. The perceptiveness can be cultivated by practice and formal training in studying humour and art.

(Martin 81-2)

While I at some level, believe that a sense of humor is highly personal (explaining why I do not particularly get any enjoyment from watching Jerry Lewis, yet the French seem to find him hysterically funny), it is validating to hear Martin express something that I believe to be true: namely, that by studying and understanding humor, we can increase our own and others’ appreciation of it. It is important for us to understand how and why humor works. There is a kind of language of humor and as Clarke suggests, in order for us to appreciate and understand any human activity we need to study and understand its symbolic forms (1). In my mind, the best way to understand symbolic forms is to study the science of signs and symbols: semiotics.
“A jest’s prosperity lies in the ear of him that hears it, never in the tongue of him that makes it”

- Shakespeare, (Love’s Labor’s Lost, 5.2.861-863)

Chapter 2: Is it a Semi-Automatic or Manual Semiotic? - A Review and Development of Semiotic Approaches to Comedy

In its most basic definition, semiotics is the study of signs and how they create meaning. Semiotics as a methodology developed initially in the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce and later developed in the writings of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Many other authors have developed semiotics as a theory and a methodology, notably Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, Yuri Lotman, and Thomas Sebeok. Semiotics has been used in a variety of fields, such as linguistics, literature, film, and communication studies, to explain how meaning is created through signs. Its versatility as a methodology has allowed semiotics to be applied to a variety of media where it is used to describe how signs are used to create meanings specific to that medium. In this chapter, the history and general terms of semiotics are introduced with the purpose of grounding the reader in the background and terminology in preparation for the introduction of a semiotic theory of comedy. In addition, I review the existing literature on semiotic theories of comedy in this chapter. Various theories, many of which do not exist in English translation, are presented and critiqued for their relative strengths and weaknesses. I explain how semiotic theory can be applied to comedy in a variety of ways and in a variety of comic formats illustrating how a semiotic theory of comedy can be applied across the arts in a way that is not bound
by traditional linguistic semiotic theories. To conclude, I make a case for the value of an interdisciplinary approach to studying comedy and how semiotics can be utilized in that attempt.

The Sign in History

In order to develop a semiotic theory of comedy, it is important to refer briefly some of the history of semiotics. There is an impressive amount of work detailing the history of semiotics and exploring the use of signs. In terms of the ancient origin and use of signs, Manetti’s *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity* is particularly interesting and useful. Nöth’s *Handbook of Semiotics* has a comprehensive section on the history of semiotic theory, and is generally highly recommended for any serious (or comical) study of the field. Clarke also effectively traces the history of the idea of signs in his *Principles of Semiotic*. For a close scrutiny of the early period of semiotic history, the reader is recommended to these sources. It is important to note that in ancient times, semiotics was not developed as a methodology, but signs were seen as a way of understanding or interacting with the world. For our purposes, it is important to know that since ancient times, signs were seen as indications of phenomena in the natural world. For instance, smoke was a sign of fire, clouds a sign of an impending storm, and a grimace the sign of pain (Clarke 12-13).

Barthes develops ancient ideas of the sign in his writing by referencing three different, but related concepts of signs and what they mean. Barthes’ three categories are tekmerion, eikos, and semion. Tekmerion is a sure index. The example that he uses is a woman who has given birth. This is a sure index that she has had sexual intercourse with
a man. The sign always points to the same thing. Barthes is quick to point out that this sure index depends on public certainty and knowledge and this varies over time and across societies. Indeed today, in the age of artificial insemination, this sure index of a woman’s state of being pregnant is no longer so sure. Eikos refers to the probable, perhaps an educated guess. (This is in many ways parallel to Peirce’s abduction.) Barthes suggests things like the idea that a father loves his children belong to this category. The proposition is very likely true, but it is not necessarily so. The semion is the more traditional sign. Barthes suggests that this one is more ambiguous and less certain. The example he gives is that traces of blood suggest a murder. He says that the traces could result from something else entirely, such as a nosebleed or a sacrifice and then argues that there must be other signs that reinforce the sign reading so that the signs cease to be polysemic. It is necessary to use context to figure out the precise meaning of a semion (Barthes, *Semiotic 61-3*). These last two categories are particularly important to us as we develop a semiotic theory of comedy. The ambiguity of a semion and the uncertainty of an eikos allow for a wide range of interpretations that comedy can use to create incongruities. A tekmerion is also subject to this same type of semiotic undermining, but a direct negating of a tekmerion would tend to be categorized as nonsense or absurdity. While nonsense and absurdity fall into the larger category of comedy, they lack some of the subtle interplay that can occur with ambiguity. Another important distinction to be made between different types of signs is the difference between indicative and associative types of signs. An indicative sign is one that stands for the unobservable; for instance, sweat could be a sign of invisible pores and laughter a sign of mirth. Associative is
defined by past correlations such as a scar being the sign of a wound, smoke is a sign of a fire, etc. (Clarke 16).

It is important to note that at the early stage of writing about signs, there was no relationship between the idea of semion and linguistic signs. This would not occur until the middle ages. Clarke states that this logical step was “one taken only later by St Augustine and the Medieval logical tradition that followed him” (17). This step is very important for us because it lays the groundwork for studying a completely arbitrary system of symbols. Language functions by conventional agreement that words should mean certain things when they are used and put together in certain ways. The connection of the sign with language allows us to examine linguistic humor. It also plays an important role in the development of one of the branches of semiotics pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure. Before we get to Saussure, however, we need to look at the founder of modern semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce.

**Peirce, Saussure and Modern Semiotics**

In order to develop our theory of semiotics it is important to lay down some of the groundwork established by the major figures in the field of semiotics. Their works provide the basis and the terminology for further development. Charles Sanders Peirce is one of the first and most important figures in semiotics. A collection of his writings called *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* is the first major elaboration of semiotics as an epistemological theory. Peirce’s theories and his terms underlie most later approaches to semiotics. Peirce sets up the terms basic to the theory of semiotics in his philosophical writings:
A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. (99)

The representamen is the sign. It indicates or points to an object (a real, existing thing) and creates an interpretant in the mind of the viewer. This is a mental image produced by the sign. This definition of the sign is complicated by his larger philosophical views of phenomenology. He describes his sign in terms of the ideas of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Firstness deals with internal qualities. It refers to fact, the quality or state of freedom or potentiality of a thing. Secondness, is more dynamic, it is action and motion. It deals with opposition, juxtaposition, dimensions, boundaries, and contact with things outside of itself. Thirdness is a law that governs the behaviour of something and its relationship with things outside itself. It defines a relationship between firstness and secondness, a habit or memory. Thirdness describes the relationship between Peirce’s signs.

In order to define more precisely how signs function, he breaks his signs down into a series of related trichotomies including icon, index, and symbol; qualisign, sinsign, and legisign; and rheem, dicisign, and law or argument. Most of the semioticians who have followed Peirce have concentrated on the icon, index, and symbol as the most important.
Each of these plays a role in determining meaning and provides a way to begin to describe how signs function, and Peirce goes into considerable detail classifying each of these types of signs. He does, however, state the following: “It is a nice problem to say to what class a given sign belongs; since all the given circumstances of the case have to be considered. But it is seldom requisite to be very accurate; for if one does not locate the sign precisely, one will easily come near enough to its character for any ordinary purpose of logic” (119). We will follow Peirce’s implied suggestion, and only categorize particular classes of signs up until the point that they will be logically useful to us.

The icon, an embodiment of Peirce’s firstness, is something that has a resemblance to the object with which it is associated. This includes things like pictures, photographs, film images or anything that “by the direct observation of it other truths concerning its object can be discovered than those which suffice to determine its construction” (Peirce 105-6). An index (an example of secondness in Peirce’s system) is a sign that does not resemble its object, but somehow points to it or draws attention to it. Peirce gives examples such as a sundial which indicates the time, a knock on the door which grabs our attention, or a weathervane which connects a direction with the wind. Silverman seeks to clarify Peirce’s concept of the index, which is somewhat obtuse at times by stating: “The signifying value of the weathervane resides not in its physical relationship to the wind, but in the concepts ‘wind’ and ‘direction’ which it permits the observer to link up” (19). Thus, an index allows us to connect two ideas by some fixed relationship between them.

The symbol (an example of thirdness) is a sign that is arbitrarily attached to its object by a rule or a convention. Peirce includes in this category words, sentences, books, etc. These
are things that have no motivated reason for being as they are except that that is the accepted and agreed upon meaning. It is a law or a convention that makes it mean what it does. We will see that this same idea is central to Saussure’s understanding of the sign. While Peirce cannot be considered the first and final authority on the theory of semiotics, he does provide much of the terminology and groundwork for semiotics as a whole and for a semiotic approach to comedy.

Another major figure in the development of semiotics is Ferdinand de Saussure. While Peirce is explicating a semiotic theory of knowledge, Saussure is explicating a semiotic theory of linguistics. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure develops a linguistic theory of semiotics. Saussure’s writings, like Peirce’s, are used as a methodological foundation for a semiotic theory of comedy. For Saussure, a sign consists of a sound image or signifier and a concept or signified. “A given concept unlocks a corresponding sound-image in the brain” (Saussure 11). Saussure completely leaves out the object that a sign refers to as unimportant in a language system. His ideas are also notable in that he emphasizes the arbitrary nature of the signifier. The signifier only means what it does because that is the common consensus. Although the signifier is arbitrary, it cannot be changed at whim. “The signifier, though to all appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it” (Saussure 71). A change in the common consensus has to occur. Saussure also emphasizes the importance of identity as a continuous semiotic existence. He gives an example of a street that is demolished and then rebuilt, which is still viewed as the old street even if no part of it is actually the same (108). This, as we will see, is
related to the idea of connotation and emphasizes the unimportance of a physical object in Saussure’s theory. The importance of this distinction between Peirce and Saussure’s theories of semiotics becomes particularly evident when discussing verbal or linguistic humor. For Saussure, linguistics is only part of semiology (as he calls it). He is really looking for “A science that studies the life of signs within society” (16). As it stands, however, Saussure’s theory excludes things like natural signs, indices, and signs by organisms other than humans (Clarke 29). Saussure’s ideas are examined and used in this project primarily as a means of understanding how the comic undermining of signification occurs on a linguistic level. The convergences and distinctions between these two major theories are used to analyze comedic theory from a semiotic perspective.

The system of semiotic codes described by these two authors is something that is very complex with myriads of interwoven webs of related meanings. Each trichotomy that makes up a sign system in Peirce starts a new set of trichotomies. Each idea or sign in Saussure has a web of directly and tangentially related meanings. These meanings are highly codified and are understood to have certain significance often differentiated by very fine shades of meaning.

There has been an historical divide between followers of Peirce and Saussure in the field of semiotics:

Historically, and by accidents of national intellectual traditions, followers of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in particular and scholars with backgrounds in the language sciences generally early constituted a kind of sociological majority within semiotics. Within this nucleus and beyond,
there has been gradual awakening of consciousness to the extensive writings of Peirce as the true contemporary founder of a systematic foundational, doctrine of signs. (Deely 7)

This distinction is important to introduce here because many of the sources of semiotic theories of comedy come from the European/Saussurean tradition of semiotics. This tradition was originally called “semiology” as opposed to the tradition following Peirce which was called “semiotics.” Semiotics includes “linguistic and non-linguistic signs, and including natural events not produced for the purposes of communication” (Clarke 37). Today the term has been largely standardized to “semiotics” although, semiology is occasionally referred to, to reference the Saussurean, linguistic tradition.

Currently, the majority of scholars accept the broader definition of semiotics pioneered by Peirce. Oehler states, “The Peircian model of triadic semiosis proves itself superior, in contrast, because it is also applicable to phenomena which do not involve a sender as such, e.g. natural phenomena, which we interpret as symptoms, like fever as a symptom of specific illnesses. This inclusion of symptoms into the class of semiotic processes means that natural phenomena can also be decoded as signs, and are thus correspondingly amenable to semiotic representation” (8). Although Peirce is generally accepted to be the father of modern semiotics and is used extensively throughout the field of semiotics, there is still a strong vein of Saussurian semiotics that runs through much of European semiotic scholarship and helps to inform the semiotic process. It is also helpful for developing a semiotic understanding of linguistic comedy and plays an important role in several of the European scholars’ writings on semiotics and comedy. Both Peirce and
Saussure inform much of the later scholarship in semiotics and will be developed in relation to comedy in more detail in later chapters.

**Conditions of Comedy**

Before beginning a review of the existing literature on semiotics and comedy, it is worthwhile to pause here and mention a few characteristics of comedy. Because comedy is such a complex phenomenon, it is often difficult to understand why it works sometimes and with some people and why it does not work at other times. There are some basic conditions that affect the reaction of people to comedy and are important for comedy to be effective. As we argued in the last chapter, incongruity is an important factor in much of comedy, but it is not a sufficient condition for comedy to be experienced. I am going to define two general categories that seem to be necessary for the appreciation of comedy to occur. These categories I will call cognitive climate and emotional climate. Without these, something is missing that prevents the appreciation of the incongruity.

**Cognitive Climate**

In alluding to the condition I describe as cognitive climate, Kolek states, “Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the insufficiency of incongruity alone may be found in the well known phenomenon of the so-called ‘killing’ of the joke. Although the incongruity will remain in it, since the elements and their attributes as well as the amount of provided information are unchanged, its comic effect will be lost as a result of such a simple operation as a change in the sequencing of the data” (158). This change in the sequencing of the data affects how the mind processes or structures comedy so that incongruity can function. Cognitive climate is a region with fuzzy boundaries trapped between two
opposing forces. On the one hand, people need to have the necessary knowledge to understand what comparisons are being made or what ideas are being played with to understand what is funny about the situation. This is why humor, especially linguistic humor, often does not work across cultural boundaries. We will discuss this in greater detail when we get to the section on sign competency. On the other hand, there is a danger of knowing too much. This spoils the surprise and the incongruity.

Umberto Eco remarks on this dilemma about the amount of information provided for a joke or comic moment. “It must be presupposed both by the utterer and by the audience. If the speaker spells it out, he is a fool, or a jerk; if the audience does not know it, there is no comic effect” (“Frames” 6). Spelling out the circumstances of the joke or the comic moment creates a shift from an implicit mode to an explicit mode, and this becomes redundant to the audience who has the capacity to figure it out for themselves (Kolek 158). This gets into fairly complex structural considerations on a semiotic level. As has been argued, comedy often functions by undermining meaning and breaking rules. Mizzau describes two ways in which the careful withholding of information (or remaining in the implicit mode) in light of a comic subversion, functions to create comedy. She describes these two as “a) the unsaid rule is violated” and “b) the violated rule remains unsaid” (“Facetia” 29). While initially this distinction appears to be largely semantic in nature, she does go on to more carefully define what she means. In the first case, the text refers to an extralinguistic context that becomes part of the context necessary for understanding the comedy. In the second case, the comedic mechanism, relies primarily on the construction of the text rather than some exterior context (“Facetia” 29). In the
first case, understanding the comedy requires a sign competence composed of cultural, intellectual, and referential material. In the second case, the burden of creating the comic effect is based on how well the comic author structures the joke, narrative, or other comic medium. Of course in a comic medium, the rules of logic do not always apply. Sometimes, as Perlmutter argues, we just have to shut down our critical reasoning to enjoy the joke. We cannot overanalyze it (164-5).

**Emotional Climate**

This category is used to describe the series of elements that are important for a person to be emotionally able and predisposed to understand and appreciate comedy. Attardo suggests that some of the emotional elements that affect the observer’s reaction include concerns, tensions, and polarities (182). If we are personally or emotionally involved with a subject, that will affect how we react to comedic examinations of it. If a person one really dislikes falls into a mud puddle, one might find that incongruity quite comedic. It is not as likely to be funny, if it is one’s best friend on the way to an important job interview. Likewise if one observes a driver who is weaving and cutting across traffic and then the driver gets caught at a railroad crossing and has to wait for a very long, very slow-moving train, it could be quite funny. On the other hand, if it is a young mother who is trying to rush a sick child to the hospital, there is not likely to be much humor involved. This difference in opinion of what is funny can occur for any strongly held belief. Dirty jokes are less likely to appeal to someone who has strongly held moral beliefs in opposition to them. Manetti suggests that people of one political party would be unlikely to enjoy the political jokes of an opposing party (“Semiotica” 150).
Most psychological theories of comedy agree that surprise and incongruity are important elements in comedy. This ties into the emotional state of a person who is more or less functioning at a base level. With a surprise, they are suddenly taken to a different emotional level. Suls argues, “the greater the divergence of a stimulus from expectation in one or more dimensions, the funnier the stimulus” with the proviso that the “perception of incongruity must occur in a safe or nonthreatening environmental to evoke humor” (41). He argues that the bigger the surprise, the funnier it is, and that painful and anxious material has the potential to be funnier than less emotionally charged material because it can increase the surprise and the ultimate resolution of the incongruity (47). This also explains, to some extent, why jokes or comic situations can lose their comedy after a while. The great Danish (I will resist a Great Dane joke here) philosopher Soren Kierkegaard described the process thus: “When something that is in itself comical has become customary, and so belongs to the order of the day, it does not arouse attention, and we laugh only when it is manifested in some higher degree” (qtd. in Morreall, Philosophy 86). Repetition can spoil the surprise and thus the incongruity. While it is too restrictive to suggest that all humor is caused from surprise (for instance, some of the humor of running jokes results from the anticipation of the joke rather than the surprise), it does indicate one of the elements of the emotional climate of the observer that can play an important role in the appreciation of comedy.

The cognitive and emotional climate categories are sometimes interrelated, so it is advisable to remember that it is not always possible to draw a hard and fast distinction between the two. One example is found in the setting of the comic scene. When people
tell a joke, they often introduce it in such a way as to indicate that there is a joke coming up. They will often say something like “I’ve got one” or “Did you hear the joke about . . .” These types of introductory phrases are designed to introduce the topic in a humorous context. At the cognitive level, this is a cue to the observer that the following should be read in a humorous way. At the emotional level, this sense of joking, or play, can pervade the atmosphere and dispose the person to a joking mood. A bomb going off in Inspector Clouseau’s apartment in a Pink Panther film can be funny. A bomb going off in one’s best friend’s apartment is not. Similarly, a bomb exploding in a serious film would also not be funny. We can laugh at the first example, because of the comedic environment that is set up in the film. We know it is safe and that no one really gets hurt. In the second example, the person who could get hurt is real and someone who is close to us. The third example is also not typically comedic because the creator of the film brings us to a point where we are emotionally involved in the film, and within the context of the film, we know that there is a real danger to the characters, who will not be able to just pick themselves up and dust themselves off. Likewise, if we are in an art gallery and view an incongruity, we are less likely to find it funny because of the emotional and cognitive tone of reverence or appreciation for the serious nature of art.

**Semiotic Comedians**

Beginning in the late 1960s, two major groups began to explore how semiotics could be applied to comedy. These groups were not composed, as the title may have misleadingly implied, of comedians, but were in fact scholars and semioticians. In English language discourse, scholars approached comedy primarily from a linguistic perspective.
In Italy, another school of philosophers also addressed the issue of semiotics and comedy from a linguistic perspective, but began to expand the approach to include non-verbal comedy.

The first significant work to specifically address the semiotics of comedy appears in Gillo Dorfles’ _Artificio e Natura_ (Artifice and Nature) in 1968. In this book, he has a chapter, “Per una Semiotica del Comico” (Towards a Semiotics of the Comic), in which he elaborates the first semiotic theory of comedy. Dorfles’ work is quite remarkable for a couple of reasons. First, this is the first stated attempt to argue for a semiotic theory of comedy. Dorfles says specifically that he is trying to prove the existence of a comic sign (Artificio 98). His work is also remarkable for its broad scope. In it, he attempts to apply his semiotic theory of comedy to a variety of forms including film, theater, visual arts, and language. Dorfles relies heavily on Bergson’s mechanical superiority theory in this chapter, particularly in his description of comedy achieved by repetition. (Interestingly, in an article written some years later, Dorfles suggests that he no longer thinks that Bergson’s theory is adequate in explaining all comedy. [“Semiotica” 21]). Dorfles explains that comedy can be produced if things are taken out of context, if there is a change between the sign and the referent, or if there is a deformation of language. In each case, a signifying system is being placed in a paradoxical relationship with its expected signification. This is in many ways much closer to the incongruity theory than it is to the superiority theory. Dorfles does convincingly employ Bergson in explaining how comedy is created through repetition, automatization, and inversion (Artificio 112). Repetition in particular works well with Bergson’s philosophy. The mechanical process of repetition
becomes carried to ridiculous extremes, and this constant repetition shows an inability to react to a changing situation and creates humor (Artificio 102). While Dorfles does try to account for a variety of different art forms in his article, his approach is somewhat limited in that it still deals only peripherally with non-linguistic forms of semiotic comedy, a weakness which he, himself admits (Artificio 115). In addition, Dorfles does not attempt to develop a comprehensive semiotic theory of comedy suggesting that an exact and minute attempt to arrive at a semiotics of comedy would be too complex and arduous (Artificio 101). Although his article ultimately stops far short of developing a comprehensive theory of the semiotics of comedy, it does open the dialogue and provides numerous examples of how semiotics can be profitably used to study comedy. Particularly interesting is Dorfles argument that film, as a medium, is particularly well-suited as a vehicle of comic representation (Artificio 101).

North American Scholarship

Most of the English language discussion of semiotic theories of comedy appears in the journal Semiotica. The first and perhaps most comprehensive English language foray into this realm was “Homo Ridens: Towards a Semiotic Theory of Humour and Laughter” by G. B. Milner in 1972. In this article, Milner examines some of the history of the philosophical theories of comedy and begins to describe what a semiotics of comedy might look like. There is no indication in this article that Milner was aware of Dorfles’ earlier work. Milner describes a comprehensive approach to a semiotics of comedy, not limiting it to linguistic studies. He states, “if humour is not restricted to verbal situations alone, and if one of the central problems of semiotics is the proper correlation of linguistic
systems of signs with extralinguistic systems, a better knowledge of the structure of humour is likely to make an important contribution to our studies” (2). This is an important step in developing the field, but one that was not followed very closely by those who were influenced by his writing. Most of the English language work on the subject stayed fairly closely tied to linguistic comedy. Milner also introduces an idea into a semiotic study of comedy that proves to be quite useful. He states, “humour-based laughter is generated by discrete elements taken, not in isolation, but in conjunction” (2). This idea will be developed later in our study. He later develops this idea as it relates to the incongruity theory of comedy. This is not the only thrust of his article which deals with numerous philosophical works on comedy, but proves to be critical in explaining how comedy functions at a semiotic level. Milner states, “within a single situation, and a single linguistic context, two universes collide, and it is this collision that makes many forms of humour possible” (16). Despite Milner’s call for examining comedy in non-linguistic semiotics, he too is guilty of almost exclusively emphasizing linguistic comedy.

Milner creates three categories of semiotic reversals or incongruities, each comprising five specific types. The three categories are paradigmatic reversals (puns), syntagmatic reversals (spoonerisms), and paragrammatic reversals (chiastic structures). Each of these groups is broken into the same five categories: phonological, morphological, syntactical, lexical, and situational. While the specific examples of this structure are illuminating, the structure is overly limiting and weighted towards the linguistic. Of the five, only “situational” could be considered non-linguistic and his examples for this type are not entirely convincing or humorous. The other major problem with Milner’s article is
that he tries too hard to attach humor to laughter. While the two are often related as we have discussed, there are many psychological and physiological causes of laughter unrelated to humor, and likewise there is humor that does not provoke laughter. “Milner’s major mistake is that he abandons the realm of structural linguistics and semiology for the psychological determinism of his conclusion” (Johnson, R., “Realms” 214). Because of this somewhat divided focus, and relative brevity of the article, Milner does little more than introduce and lay down the groundwork for a semiotics of comedy.

Semiotica continued to sporadically publish articles on semiotics and comedy over the next two decades. For the most part, these articles largely deal with linguistic humor and most of them are explicitly indebted to Milner’s work. It is also interesting to note that the school of Italian semioticians who were writing on comedy at the same time were almost completely ignored, even though Umberto Eco sat on the editorial board of Semiotica during this entire period. A brief exploration of the types of articles and the subjects they addressed during this period is helpful in understanding the development of semiotics and comedy.


In 1978 Joel Sherzer published an article that dealt specifically with the pun as a
linguistic semiotic phenomenon. Leszek Kolek followed in the same linguistic tradition with his 1985 article on the semiotic structure of jokes. One of the most useful elements that Kolek elaborates that can be expanded beyond a purely linguistic approach is his understanding of how the incongruity theory works in semiotic terms. “Generally speaking, incongruity is seen as depending on three interrelated factors, namely, an adequate sign competence of the recipient, the degree of the apparent incompatibility of the incongruous elements, and logically sufficient clues allowing for a solution of the contradiction” (152). This idea will be developed in detail later in the chapter. Neal Norrick in 1987 expands on similar ideas on jokes and incongruity to address how humor is created in larger comic texts. Kreitler, Drechsler, and Kreitler approach jokes again in a 1988 article which comes primarily from a psychological background and methodology. Although they attempt to create an exhaustive set of criteria in which to categorize meaning dimensions in jokes they largely ignore existing semiotic theory of comedy in their focused psychological experiment on the linguistic meaning structure of jokes.

Despite Milner’s call for a broad based semiotic study of comedy, each of the above articles focuses on small areas of linguistic comedy. In 1991, Denys Lessard, a French Canadian writing in French, published an article “Calembours et Dessins d’Humour” (Puns and Humorous Drawings) in Semiotica. This appears to be the first article in the journal that addresses in detail semiotic theories of comedy in something other than linguistic terms. Lessard brings in humorous drawings and compares the structure of their meaning to verbal puns. While this article is branching out to include visual comedy, it is still closely aligned with linguistic theories of comedy tying visual
humor into linguistic phenomena. Lessard also seems to be unaware of the work of Italian
semiticians on comedy. We will be looking at some of Lessard’s arguments when we
address visual humor in chapter four.

**Italian Scholarship**

As was mentioned earlier, Dorfles is the first semiotician to systematically address
comedy, but many other Italian semioticians would take up the challenge in their study of
comedy. Unlike North American writings on the subject, several different Italian journals
carried articles on semiotics and comedy. One of the first scholars to publish on the
subject after Dorfles was Attilio Brilli whose 1972 article “Per un Semiotica della Satira”
(Towards a Semiotics of Satire) directly addresses the relatively complex comic form of
satire. Brilli uses Byron’s *Don Juan* as a case study of satire which he then develops into a
generalized theory of semiotic satire. Not surprisingly, much of his theory embodies
elements of the incongruity theory. Brilli states, “satiric language deliberately plays with
the ambiguity of the codification” (20). This ambiguity is then presented as a paradoxical
comparison of contradictory ideas and narratives. Although Brilli is only addressing one
aspect of comedy, he is addressing a relatively complicated comedic structure.

In 1976, Italian Ferruccio Rossi-Landi published an English language article on
absurdity in *Semiotica*. This was originally an article for a staff colloquy at an American
university in 1963. Although this article is primarily a philosophical exploration of
absurdity (a subject which is only sometimes comical), it does provide some interesting
insights into Italian thought on the comic. He also suggests that absurdity is not limited to
linguistic phenomena. Rossi-Landi states that in some cases, “Absurdity or non-sensicality
 [. . .] has to be located somewhere other than in the use of language as such” (363). Even though Rossi-Landi’s theories were heavily influenced by the still dominant Marxist tradition (De Lauretis 252), this idea emphasizes the value of studying the semiotics of comedy in more than just linguistic terms.

A significant portion of the Italian literature surrounding comedy comes out of the University of Bologna and the semioticians associated with it. This group which worked closely with and influenced each other have produced an impressive body of work. Works from these and other semioticians appear in Italian in journals such as *Alfabeto, Il Verri*, and *Versus* and in published collections of essays.

The writings of Giovanni Manetti are perhaps the most remarkable explorations of comedy as a semiotic phenomenon. Undoubtedly, it is a subject that he has returned to more than any other scholar. Manetti’s first published work, the 1976 “Per una Semiotica del Comico” (Towards a Semiotics of Comedy), is one of the most comprehensive approaches to a comedic semiotic theory yet written. Much of his later work deals with the comic theory he developed in these early observations. In this article, Manetti not only deals with the semiotics of comedy at a linguistic level, but also begins to develop a general semiotic theory of comedy as an aesthetic phenomenon. In this article, he also addresses, at least briefly, topics such as literature, film, and theater. Manetti argues that the many individual philosophical and psychological explorations of humor are all facets of the larger concept of the comic (“Semiotica” 131). Citing Dorfles, Brilli, and Milner, Manetti argues that comedy is produced when there is a change between the sign and the referent (“Semiotica” 134) and then goes on to elaborate a system that attempts to
describe how comedy is created by a variety of incongruous dichotomies. While many of the examples that Manetti provides in this article are linguistic, he does address other media. Manetti again showed off his diversity with an article about the semantics of the comic bodies and performances of clowns ("Entrate Clownesche" 1979). In a 1980 article, he goes on to specifically address, in much greater depth, comedy in Dadaist and Surrealist art. Manetti’s diversity and commitment to studying comedy is shown in his journal length collaborations with Patrizia Violi. In 1977 they published an article that occupied the full issue of Versus called “Grammatica Dell’Arguzia” (The Grammar of Wit). In this article, they examine in minute linguistic detail a particular type of Italian linguistic riddle called a mnemonic cryptograph. The mnemonic cryptograph establishes two separate and distinct levels of signification within the same comic riddle (Manetti and Violi “Grammatica” 4). Unfortunately, the usefulness of this work for our purposes is somewhat limited, since most of these riddles simply do not translate well. Their 1979 article together L’Analisis del Discorso (The Analysis of Discourse) is a much broader attempt to describe discourse as a semiotic phenomenon. While this is not a text primarily on comedy, it is addressed several times as an important part of discourse and provides valuable insight into how isotopies function in comic discourse as will be discussed later in the chapter.

Because Manetti’s semiotic approach to comedy is so comprehensive in intent and scope, it is worthwhile to spend some time outlining some of his basic arguments in his first article “Per un Semiotica del Comico.” This will prove to be illuminating to some of our later discussion of semiotic comic theory and specific case studies of comedy. Manetti
begins by introducing various definitions of comedy. He states, “the comic was considered a true and appropriate concept of aesthetics; the aesthetic being understood as a general theory of artistic representation” (“Semiotica” 130). The comic was broken up into various sub-partitions of art such as comedy, satire, and ironic or witty expressions (“Semiotica” 130). The other approach to comedy was as a psychological phenomenon related to a theory of emotions (“Semiotica” 131). One of Manetti’s initial concerns with these categories is that they have reduced comedy to merely an artistic or psychological phenomenon (“Semiotica” 131). Manetti goes on to suggest that some of the more recent studies of the comic that have looked at comedy as an aspect of communication have proven to be more helpful (“Semiotica” 133). Manetti does indicate that the aesthetic and the comic often coincide (“Semiotica” 137). Influenced by Greimas and his theory of bisociation, Manetti elaborates a series of binary oppositions which he uses as the basis of his analysis. His categories are as follows: ordinariness/estrangement, redundancy/information, singly voiced/multiply voiced, and free semantic combination/conditional semantic combination.

Manetti describes estrangement as an otherness when compared to the ordinary. He suggests that when there are two types of estrangement possible. The first is between the language as a system of signs and the object it refers to and the second is between the language and itself (“Semiotica” 135). The first refers to cases where a word is used symbolically so frequently that it progressively assumes a more and more symbolic role. He cites expressions like a table leg which has become so abstracted from a human leg to which it is being compared that we no longer think of it in any other terms. The
estrangement occurs when a table leg is read in its original and not metaphorical sense. The estrangement between language and itself, Manetti describes as a function of the way that language is actually used. Because of the necessities for shortcuts in and the actual pronunciation of spoken language, not all parts of words are clearly spoken or pronounced, which allows for ambiguity (Manetti, “Semiotica” 136). Manetti then goes on to define six principles of estrangement that produce comedy.

The first type he defines as the principle of metonymic-synecdochic “marriage.” This refers to metonymy in which the name of a thing is substituted for something with which it is typically associated. A synecdoche is a specific type of metonymy where part is substituted for the whole or the whole for a part. For instance, when someone says, “he had a hand in that” it means that he influenced or took part in it. The action of the hand is a synecdoche for the whole ability to act of the person. The second type he defines as the principle of metaphoric “identification.” When two terms are associated, one term is used in the place of the other. Number three is the principle of variation of the subject of the emission. This is slightly more complicated to explain than the previous examples.

Essentially, Manetti is suggesting that this occurs when there is a paradoxical relationship between a message that is emitted and a second term that moves away from it. Manetti cites the paradoxical difference between an author of a narrative and the narrator. Manetti’s example is helpful in illustrating this point. He cites a joke where a mental patient, who thinks he is a dog, tells the director of the institute that he is cured. The director asks if he is certain. He replies, “Certainly, touch my nose, it’s cold.” In this case, there is a paradox or logical disconnect between the subject of emission, the human,
and the animal axis of meaning. Manetti’s fourth principle is the principle of decontextualization. This removes something from its standard context, in terms of time periods, moods, boundaries, styles, etc. The fifth principle is the principle of deformation. This could be linguistic deformation, but it could also be visual deformation or take a variety of other forms. The sixth, and final, principle is the principle of parallelism. This creates humor by setting up parallelisms between two things and letting their similarities become evident. Manetti suggests that often in actual examples of comedy, multiple principles apply (“Semiotica” 138-40).

The second type of binary oppositions according to Manetti, is between redundancy/information. While Manetti goes into quite some detail into cybernetic theory to explain this opposition, it essentially boils down to two major possibilities. The first is that in a chain of language, some event occurs that is contrary to the established rules of the use of that language and against expectation. This is, of course, a clear example of the incongruity theory at work. The second occurs when some information in the language or event causes a kind of feedback loop, in which the observer must reinterpret the entire chain in light of the new information (“Semiotica” 143-4). (Think of the punch-line of a joke.)

The third pair of oppositions is singly voiced/multiply voiced. Manetti explains that something that is singly voiced has one unambiguously intended meaning. He also explains that language develops ambiguity over time. Words that start out unambiguously become polysemous or otherwise have their signification changed. He suggests that three ways that ambiguity is avoided are 1. context, 2. pragmatic factors of communication, and
3. through a metalinguistic discourse that contains a request for precision followed by a response (Manetti, “Semiotica” 146). In practical terms, this means clearing up the ambiguity through talking about what is actually meant. Multiply voiced is essentially something that can be read or understood in more than one sense. Central to this idea for Manetti is the idea of isotopy and bisociation which we will address later in the chapter.

The last category, free semantic combination/conditional semantic combination, is relatively simple in theory. Essentially, what Manetti argues is that ordinary language can take any content and organize it into a more or less coherent whole. Comic language on the other hand, is bound to or conditional upon, realistic language. This is necessary so that comic language can be read against the established ordinary language and it is made through the incongruity that this creates (Manetti, “Semiotica” 150). This extended explanation of Manetti’s categories will implicitly and explicitly inform our discussion of semiotic theories of comedy.

Umberto Eco, one of the best known scholars of semiotics, has also evidenced a significant interest in comedy. In his 1980 essay “The Comic and the Rule,” Eco defines comedy in opposition to tragedy and explains, at a narrative semiotic level, how they function as literary forms. Comedy is described as subversive in nature and does not adhere to established semiotic and cultural codes (Travels 269-78). Eco expands upon these ideas in a 1984 essay “The Frames of Comic ‘Freedom’” and draws upon Bachtin’s description of the Carnivalesque to emphasize comedy’s subversive nature. In addition, Eco’s 1980 novel The Name of the Rose is very much concerned with semiotics and comedy in the form of Aristotle’s lost manuscript in the second book of Poetics on the
subject of comedy. While comedy is peripheral to Eco’s larger goal of a general theory of
semiotics, it plays an important role in his thinking and writing.

Marina Mizzau wrote on the subject of comedy and jokes in her 1982 article
“Lector in Facetia” (Readings in Witty Sayings). She is concerned primarily with the small
subset of comedy found in linguistic jokes much like Johnson and Kolek are. She later
addresses irony, another subset of comedy, in a 1992 article, “La Qualità dell’Ironia” (The
Quality of Irony). One of the most useful concepts that Mizzau espouses, is that
observers tend to “fill in the gaps in the text according to customary inferential patterns”
(Attardo 181) and thus are misled.

To round out our examination of the major figures in the Italian scholarship on the
semiotics of comedy we have Massima Bonafin whose 1985 article on parody as a
semiotic phenomenon and another subcategory of comedy provides some interesting
insight in the comic sub-genre. Parody takes existing semiotic and narrative codes and
undermines and plays with their semiotic systems. Like Brilli, Bonafin is describing only
one subset of comedy.

This brief survey of the work that has been done in this area, makes obvious the
breadth and the amount of work on comedy produced by Italian semioticians. In light of
this accomplishment, it seems strange that this work has gone largely ignored in English
language discourse. This chapter is, to some extent, an attempt to rectify that problem by
demonstrating the value of this research. This goal is, however, subordinate to the larger
goal of understanding how comedy works from a semiotic perspective.
**Isotopy**

An important term for textual semiotics and certainly for semiotics and comedy is the concept of isotopy. The term was borrowed from nuclear physics by Algirdas Greimas of the semiotics school of Paris (Nöth 319). Greimas defines isotopy as “a complex of manifold semantic categories making possible the uniform reading of a story” (qtd. in Eco, *Language* 189). In other words, an isotopy is more or less the topic of the text (Attardo 80). This is what gives a text “internal coherence” (Violi and Manetti, *Discorso* 19) and allows readers of the text to understand its import or direction. The idea of textual direction is important, I think, for emphasizing the purpose of the text as a whole despite individual parts that may not fit neatly into the isotopy of the text. The isotopy of the text is critical in terms of making meaning from it. Violi and Manetti state, “One of the minimal conditions for the comprehension of a text, and therefore also for the definition of its macrostructural level, is that it present at the minimum a homogenous plan of signification” (*Discorso* 58). Eco states that this process of determining the topic of the text “helps the reader to select the right frames, to reduce them to a manageable format, blow up and to narcotize given semantic properties of the sememes to be amalgamated and to establish the isotopy according to which he decides to actualize the discursive or the narrative structures of the text” (“Worlds” 10-11). In this sense, isotopy makes a given reading of the text possible.

Isotopy is a basic part of any narrative text or even of speech discourse. For communication to occur, it is necessary that all parties involved are working with the same set of rules and understanding of how the text and discourse are constructed. While many
of the isotopies and rules of discourse are understood *a priori*, this is a process that, in a narrative setting, takes place over time as an author establishes the rules and the individual direction of the text. The reader learns the rules as the author establishes them and creates a complementary mental construct to understand and process the textual isotopy. In this construction, every piece is related to every other piece in a comprehensible and coherent matrix of meaning. “Intuitively, it is understood that the coherence is a semantic property of discourse, based on the interpretation of every proposition, in relation to the interpretation of the other propositions” (Violi and Manetti, *Discorso* 19-20). Isotopy is, therefore, the understood set of rules that has to be in place and is constructed over the course of a narrative to create coherent meaning. This is, of course, where comedy steps in to create and take advantage of ambiguities and incongruities. “[Isotopy] constitutes the instrument the text offers, but that the reader needs to recognize and to be in a position to activate, to ‘standardize’ the reading, that is to say to eliminate or to resolve in a positive manner the natural ambiguity and polysemy that, from the beginning, every text presents” (Violi and Manetti, *Discorso* 59). Comedy uses this ambiguity and polysemy not to resolve the meaning of the text, but to create multiple and incongruous readings. Morreall may as well have been talking about violations or incongruities in isotopies when he stated of a child learning about the world, “He will come to laugh at the incongruity in word play, in violations of social mores and the apparent violations of physical laws, etc. Wherever he develops a pattern in his thinking, in short, there is room for a violation of that pattern and so for humor” (*Philosophy* 135).
Bisociation

Closely related to the concept of isotopy is the concept of bisociation. This is a term coined by Arthur Koestler and developed in his seminal work, The Act of Creation. In this book, bisociation is used specifically to address the creation of the comic, even though Koestler later expands it to other areas as well. In order to explain his terms, Koestler sets up a situation where two incompatible, but self-consistent frames of reference (which are essentially isotopies, although the term was not used when Koestler published his work) intersect. Koestler describes this process as follows: “The event L, in which the two intersect, is made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths, as it were. While this unusual situation lasts, L is not merely linked to one associative context, but bisociated with two” (35). In semiotic terms, that is to say, that one sign, or sign system, simultaneously has two signified. It functions independently, but coherently in two or more different isotopies. Dorfles calls this process a “conceptual jump” (“Semiotica” 21) which is to say a jump back and forth between two isotopic structures.

How Koestler used his bisociation theory to explain comedy is clear from his description of the pun. “The pun is the bisociation of a single phonetic form with two meanings-two strings of thought tied together by an acoustic knot” (64-5). (The pun will be developed in more detail, later in the chapter.) Marina Mizzau, picks up the idea of bisociation, which had been running through Italian literature on the semiotics of comedy since Manetti introduced it in “Per un Semiotica del Comico.” She applies it to the structure of the joke and indeed every comic structure. She states that there are two necessary conditions for the comic to occur. The first is a bisociation or collision between
two matrices, understood as isotopies, frames, universes of discourse, or what Norrick terms as schema (115), and the second condition is the suddenness of this collision. This suddenness is important in that it discourages analysis and therefore encourages the use of the implicit in defining the isotopies and their relation (“Facetia” 29). The use of the implicit is important in Mizzau’s argument, which as we discussed earlier suggests that the rules that are being violated cannot be explicitly stated. Likewise when we are led to assume the implicit in a joke or narrative structure, those assumptions can be overturned by providing alternate readings of the material that has been presented. It is interesting to note here that Mizzau departs from Koestler who believed that the two conditions of the comic were a bisociation (which, for him, is by nature sudden) and an aggressive component of emotional discharge (Johnson, R., “Realms” 204). Violi and Manetti specify how this process is spelled out in the structure of a joke. They argue that every joke has three content blocks that are formally distinct. The first introduces the situation and characters, the second sets up a problem or asks questions, and the third humorously resolves the problem or answers the question moving from a serious level to a comic one (Discorso 61).

When there is some element of a text that does not fit into an isotopy, Violi and Manetti suggest that there are three ways of dealing with this aberration. I want to point out here that each of the following cases can be comic, assuming that the correct conditions are present as was discussed in the sections on cognitive and emotional climate. The first response is to assume that the new element is in some manner correct, imposing on it the semantic features of the isotopic field. This allows the new element to be
integrated into the original signification. The second response is to retrospectively reevaluate and correct the preexisting isotopic code. This creates a reinterpretation based on the semantic features of the new element. The third solution to this problem is to simply accept it as an isotopic variation that requires no reevaluation or correction of the existing isotopy. Violi and Manetti are quick to point out that this last example is qualitatively different from a direct contradiction of the isotopy (Discorso 60-2). This third example is simply an irreconcilable variation rather than a pointed argument against the existing isotopy.

Sign Competence

In order to understand what is happening in the process of bisociation, or in order to be able to understand and correctly interpret isotopies, it is necessary that receivers have a certain sign competence. Kolek, as we mentioned earlier, lists this as the first of three necessary elements for experiencing comic incongruity (152). The term competence comes into semiotics from linguistics through Noam Chomsky and was used by him to describe the innate ability of humans to use language (Krampen et al. 216). For our purposes, we will be dealing with competence as the intuitive and learned abilities and knowledge necessary to understand the references being made in a text, comic or otherwise. When we are faced with an incomplete set of information, we make guesses and fill in the blanks in interpretation. As we mentioned earlier, these assumptions can be exploited when we find information that causes us to reevaluate the assumptions that we have made in light of new information and comic incongruities. We are able to piece together information to understand comedy based on our knowledge of the social,
cultural, and signifying structure of the world and the context of the text (a concept comparable to Peirce’s “ground” of the sign). Barthes suggests that this is an open process and that “there are almost always several readings possible, and this not only between one reader and the next, but also, sometimes, within one and the same reader. In other words, each of us has in himself, so to speak, several lexicons, several reservoirs of reading, depending on the kinds of knowledge, the cultural levels he possesses” (Semiotic 188). This ability to draw on our reservoirs of knowledge is important to us in any communicative practice.

The act of representation entails a corresponding act of interpretation.

Simply defined, this is the ability to extract an appropriate meaning from some sign or text. Although interpretation is subject to much individual variation, it is not an open-ended process; it involves familiarity with the meanings of signs in specific contexts, with the type of code to which they belong, and with the nature of their referents [. . .]. In essence, interpretation is a purposeful selection of specific meanings among the boundless meanings of which the human mind is capable. (Danesi 26)

In other words, we have to be actively engaged in the process of determining the isotopy of the text and in that process it is assumed that we are legitimately trying to understand the text in a meaningful and cooperative way.

Although there is some disagreement about how much this ability or competence is innate or learned, the important point for our purposes is that in order to understand many types and instances of comedy, this material has to be learned.
The child cannot enjoy humor, or even experience it as humor, until he catches on to the fact that the incongruities he is being presented with are only a playful rearranging of reality and not, say, a confusing bunch of preposterous lies. Before the child can play around with his conceptual system, in short, he has to have a pretty good grasp of that system, and has to feel comfortable in having it violated. (Morreall, Seriously 44-5)

Morreall goes on to suggest that as we develop and mature, our ability to understand and appreciate more complex and subtle forms of humor increases (Seriously 45). This happens because we have better and better understandings of the sign systems around us and can distinguish subtle variations or deformations of those systems that we would not have been previously aware of. In other words, we can learn to have a sense of humor (or at least learn to be more competent connoisseurs of comedy).

For a joke to work, the receiver of the comedy has to have a background knowledge of the elements critical to the joke (Norrick 119). Johnson calls this a “shared knowledge” (Johnson, R., “Anthropology” 311) rather than a background knowledge suggesting that there is a necessary similarity of experience between those creating the comedy and those experiencing it. He goes on to say:

Shared knowledge occurs both within the joking frame and derives to a much greater extent from interaction outside the joking frame, from the greater realms of social existence. Shared knowledge is social understanding: language, conceptual categories, roles, mutual awareness of situation. It is necessary for the perception of the joke, the referential
content of the joke itself, and the process by which the joke is constructed around its object by the joker for its audience in a given social context.

(“Anthropology” 311)

While Johnson is talking specifically about jokes as a form, the same ideas apply to any comic text, be it verbal, narrative, musical, visual, or otherwise. In order to understand and appreciate the comedy we must have the semiotic capability to not only understand the material presented, but be able to connect it together in a way that allows us to realize and then resolve the incongruity of the situation.

Violi defines two basic areas of competence; one is encyclopedic competence and the other is semantic competence. She defines encyclopedic competence in this way: “The encyclopedia is here understood as the average competence that an individual must posses to belong to a given culture” (“Enciclopedie” 105). She goes on to clarify that an encyclopedic competence does not mean that a person possesses all of the knowledge pertaining to a culture, but has a sufficient amount to be acknowledged and recognized as a member of that culture. She says that exact means of defining whether an individual has this ability is difficult since it is largely invisible within a culture, but that it becomes apparent when someone does not possess it. “Encyclopedic competence is not looked at while it is present, but is immediately noted when absent” (“Enciclopedie” 105).

Encyclopedic competence can be viewed in opposition to a previous conception of how signification functioned, namely dictionary competence. The difference is an important one. Dictionary competence is simplistic and binary in nature. An encyclopedic competence is a much broader competence, it is not necessarily linear, and has room for a
variety of information, some of which might conflict with other pieces of information. It is better thought of as a web of information with a variety of ways to get from one place to another, much like the Internet. Violi and Manetti provide a useful example, comparing these two types of competence. They select the word whale which they define in dictionary terms as a “marine mammal of the cetacean order” (Discorso 28). In contrast the encyclopedic knowledge of a whale would include this general dictionary information, what was said in the Bible about whales, the novel Moby Dick, the mythical and cultural significance that the whale has taken as a result of that book, and any other information that might be connected to the concept of “whale” (“Discorso” 28). Manetti defines the dictionary model as an equivalence model and the encyclopedia model as an implicative model (Antiquity xiv). The dictionary model held sway in the earlier development of semiotic literature, but because of the versatility and utility of the encyclopedic model, has since fallen out of favor in many areas of semiotic research (Barthes, Semiotic 196). For the purposes of comedy this is clearly a step in the right direction. While a dictionary model might well explain changes in signified meaning in comic forms like the pun, it is inadequate in dealing with more subtle and implicative types of humor, such as narrative humor, innuendo, parody, satire, and a host of other types.

Semantic competence, as described by Violi, is related to, but distinct from encyclopedic competence in that it is more specifically linguistic in nature. “It concerns the knowledge of the semantic rules that organize the meaning of the terms of a language” (“Enciclopedie” 105). She is careful to point out that the difference between semantic competence and encyclopedic competence is distinct from the difference between
dictionary competence and encyclopedic competence in that the first is not addressing qualities of knowledge, but rather differences in the competency that an individual possesses. “Intuitively we can say that there are things in which ignorance denotes a scarce or insufficient knowledge of the culture, but does not touch on our linguistic ability, and, on the contrary, in which ignorance means that we are not competent speakers of a certain language” (“Enciclopedie” 105-6). To modify Violi’s example slightly, it is different to not know if a platypus is a mammal or a bird, than it is to confuse the word “platypus” with “platitude.” Violi admits that this difference is not always easy to distinguish, but maintains that the distinction is important (“Enciclopedie” 106). Certainly, for our purposes, a misunderstanding about the classification of an animal is less likely to be comic than a malapropism, with such obvious incongruity.

**Convention**

Extrapolating from our discussion of encyclopedic knowledge it is now possible to see how convention can play an important role in creating comedy. In the first place, we need categories or logical types in order to overturn them (Rossi-Landi 366). “What marks a convention is not frequency of conformity but how we react to exceptions. It is not simply that our expectations are disappointed and our preferences frustrated. Instead, we react by criticizing an exception as a violation of a rule governing a community practice” (Clarke 87). When we have an established system of meaning, then we can subvert or change the common consensus for the comic incongruities that can be created, by working against the associated knowledge of how the world functions and creates meaning.
Paradoxically, these categories are also used to create and define comedy as well. Some things are funny because they are conventionally believed to be so. There is a natural aura of funniness that is associated with the idea of a clown, even though individual experience or individual clowns, may not fall into that category, and indeed, clowns are also frequently associated with pathos rather than comedy. Still, we have a more or less fixed notion that clowns should be funny. Frye states, “All humor demands agreement that certain things, such as a picture of a wife beating her husband in a comic strip, are conventionally funny. To introduce a comic strip in which a husband beats his wife would distress the reader, because it would mean learning a new convention” (225). This statement is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, I would suggest that the humor of the idea of a wife beating a husband is based on the incongruity of a role reversal. Men are generally physically stronger than women, and historically and culturally are much more likely to beat their wives. A wife beating her husband goes against this stereotype, and therefore creates an incongruity. In addition, because wives beating husbands are so much rarer (at least in publicized incidents) than the other way around, this is a fairly emotionally safe topic. The thinking along this line might go something like, “It is so unusual, that it is like a fantasy, not real, and therefore safe.” Husbands beating wives are much more common and generally recognized as a social ill that needs to be corrected. This puts it in an emotional context that is not conducive to comedy. Another problem with Frye’s statement is that it is a great oversimplification to declare that all humor can be defined as conventional. The role of convention is a factor that should be considered, however. It is not inconceivable that one day the idea of a husband beating a
wife, would be considered conventionally funny, but the process of learning this
convention and the changes that would have to occur in society and the mediated
representation of this issue would be far less simple than Frye suggests. The idea about
convention that I would suggest is the most important, is that it can shape our
expectations and our experience of a comic moment. There is a temptation to laugh if a
friend slips on a banana peel even if he really hurts himself. Perhaps this is, at least in part,
because of the numerous representations of the same event in countless comedies that
convince us that slipping on a banana peel is funny.

Convention and the changes that occur in the encyclopedic knowledge of societies
as they change over time or across cultural boundaries also help us analyze how comedy is
so dependent on the sign competency of the observer. Grawe, in discussing the difficulty
of producing ancient comedies in the present era, alludes to some of these problems and
variations in sign competency. “Whether an individual satire continues to speak to new
audiences depends on many factors, however, notably on whether the jokes treat universal
or contemporary issues. Satire against a specific practice or policy is much less durable
than satire against a general deformity in mankind” (80). Jokes based on issues of
competence of a culture whose mores and attitudes are very different than our own are
enigmatic to us. We do not have an adequate sign competence. Grawe goes on to
indicate that Plautus’ Menaechmi is an example of comedy that continues to interest us
(83). Indeed the story of separated twins was almost certainly taken from a Greek play,
shows up again in Shakespeare’s Comedy of Errors, Roger and Hart’s The Boys of
Syracuse, and has numerous other incarnations in popular culture including several
versions of Disney’s The Parent Trap. The reason that this idea is still used in comedy is that the fascination with twins and the possibility for mistaken identity is still very much a part of our experience and encyclopedic knowledge. Thus, this is a humorous topic that we can understand and appreciate thousands of years later. Kolek describes how this phenomenon works in a comparable example:

As such, the incongruity in the joke certainly does not impose too stringent requirements on the recipient’s sign competence, knowledge, and intellect, being based on breaking a natural law and therefore characterized by a very wide universality of appeal. [. . .] If we accept the universality of appeal criterion we may reach the opposite extreme by passing on from incongruities based on breaking natural or universal laws, through those which would increasingly rely on the time-dependent conventions, customs and principles of a given civilization, culture, race, nation, country, social and professional circles, to those of the smallest social units of friends or couples (in the so-called private or inside jokes) [. . .]. (154)

In the case of inside jokes, the comedy relies on a sign competence that is so idiosyncratic, that only a small group of people can understand and appreciate its significance.

This of course creates a problem for artists who are attempting to reach a broad audience through their comedic work. In such cases, the artist can work with basic assumptions that will be common to the sign competence of the majority of the audience and provide the necessary clues in order for the audience to acquire the necessary sign competence. This goes back to the idea we discussed earlier when we suggested that
isotopies are built by the author over time. Eco describes the process in this way.

To make his text communicative the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as shared by his possible reader. Since [...] in fact there is always a gap between the competence of the Addressee and the competence of the Sender, the Model Reader represents the type of interpreter supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the text linear manifestation in the same way as the author dealt generatively with it. To do so a well-organized text on the one hand presupposes a model of competence coming, so to speak, from outside the text, but on the other hand works to build up, by merely textual means, such a competence. (“Worlds” 6)

Convention, can therefore, be a preexisting quantity that the author can exploit, or it can be something that the author creates through the accumulation of detail and the definition of the isotopy of the text.

**Connotation**

Connotation is a concept related to sign competence. Because we are working with an encyclopedic model of signification, signs carry with them meaning beyond the one that is directly signified, or denoted. For Barthes, meaning in its most basic sense is tied to connotation and to this idea of encyclopedic knowledge (*Semiotic* 225).

Connotation can carry with it a variety of types of meaning including extensional (here understood as a metonymical extension of the original meaning), emotive (emotional nuances), and symbolic (additional meanings attributed to signs in specific contexts)
meanings (Danesi 26-7). Denotation is more straightforward in its attempt to convey meaning. “The basic denotation of a sign-vehicle can be understood just as the sender intended it to be, but different connotations can be attributed to it simply because the addressee follows another path on the compositional tree to which the sender referred (both paths being legitimately accepted by the culture in which both sender and addressee live)” (Eco, Theory 139). Thus two people can read the same message very differently. Irony is something that functions in this fashion. Both of these people will understand the denotation, but only one of the two understands the connoted irony. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, in fact, defines the joke and irony specifically in terms of a conflict between the denoted and connoted meanings (148). This conflict can again be viewed in terms of the incongruity that the two opposing sign meanings are attempting to convey.

The Semiotic Web

Yuri Lotman coined the term semiosphere which he defined as “the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages” (123). This is the sum total of the communicative background and semiotic processes that allows communication to happen. Thomas A. Sebeok described the same phenomenon in a slightly different way referring to a semiotic web. The metaphor is a useful one in that it emphasizes the breadth of the semiotic process and the myriads of intertangled connections between signs and the variety of their meanings. This concept takes into account sign competence, encyclopedic knowledge, and connotation as part of the interconnected network of meanings. This connection or web of semiosis takes place on two axes. One is what Attardo describes as a “semantic network,” which includes “The set of scripts in the lexicon, their links, plus all
the non-lexical scripts, their links, and all the links between the two sets of scripts” and also “contains all of the information a speaker has about his/her culture” (202). This is a horizontal axis and is comparable to a snapshot of the state of a language that Saussure defined as synchronic. His example of a chess game is useful. At any given point in a chess game the meaning is defined, by the relationship of the position of each of the pieces to each other and the rules that govern their movement and use (88-9). This is an excellent example of Peirce’s thirdness. The other axis is a vertical or diachronic axis. This is one that takes place over time. Lotman explains that “a symbol never belongs only to one synchronic section of a culture, it always cuts across that section vertically, coming from the past and passing on into the future. A symbol’s memory is always more ancient that [sic] the memory of its non-symbolic text-context” (103). To return to the chess analogy, this would include the strategy and movements that led the game to the current point and also includes the strategy and events that will control the game until its end.

Perhaps the best way to understand how this semiotic web applies to comedy is by following one of its threads. Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, describes a problem with categorization that is useful in explaining how comedy can follow a semiotic connection between different isotopies. Wittgenstein is dealing with the problem of how to define games which have a myriad of forms not all of which can be defined in the same terms. He references board games, card games, Olympic games, and children’s games like ring-around-the-rosie. He argues that although there are similarities between the various groups, no one thing is common to each of them. “And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and
disappear. And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (27). Wittgenstein goes on to call these connections “family resemblances” and then describes how the one thing that runs between them is the overlapping of the fibers that form, as it were, a rope (27-8). Individual fibers or similarities begin and end inside a rope, but the rope remains a contiguous whole. He then goes on to argue that any boundaried definition of games is by necessity arbitrary, and may not reflect the concept of game that any particular individual has (28-31). The game then, as he describes it is “a concept with blurred edges” (29).

Wittgenstein’s analogy is useful here in our discussion of how comedy is created in two primary ways. First, the idea of a blurred concept leaves plenty of room for ambiguity, which is something that comedy exploits to create new and unusual connections between signs and their referents. Second, it also shows us the way to follow the connections between two unrelated concepts through the use of his metaphor of fibers in a rope. A variety of normally unrelated things can be connected in this fashion.

**Juxtaposition of Signs**

One way that signs create meaning is through the relationship that objects, elements, signs, and sign systems have with each other. Barthes calls this parataxis. He cites an example of all the furnishings in a room creating a certain style (*Semiotic* 187). It is their combined meaning, not their individual meaning, that is ultimately important. When Lotman describes this juxtaposition of semiotic meaning, he is not referring to comedy, yet his ideas do provide valuable insight into what is happening when comedy is
created at the semiotic level. “What is important is that the meaning-generating principle of the text as a whole lies in the juxtaposition of segments that are in principle not juxtaposable. Their mutual recoding creates a language capable of many readings, a fact which opens up unexpected reserves of meaning” (44). I suggest that comedy is one of the things found in these unexpected reserves of meaning.

Milner describes a comedic juxtaposition in dramatic terms when he says, as was cited earlier, that “within a single situation, and a single linguistic context, two universes collide, and it is this collision that makes many forms of humour possible” (16). Milner uses an example to explain this concept more fully. “To put it differently, it is a matter not of isolated items, but of the associations and networks of relations that obtain between those items. In the case of a pompous executive slipping on a banana skin, to take the classic example, we laugh neither at the man himself, nor at the effect of losing one’s balance as a result of slipping on a banana skin, but at the association between the two” (2). This juxtaposition in semiotic terms is the same as incongruity in philosophical terms. The first element of comedy as we discussed is that incongruity, and the second part, and one that plays a large role in our appreciation of comedy, is its resolution.

Process of Resolution and Disambiguation

As was mentioned earlier, most of the current literature about the appreciation of comedy involves some kind of incongruity and resolution. Suls describes how this problem is addressed in psychoanalytic literature. “Stated quite simply, the theory is that humor results when the perceiver meets with an incongruity (usually in the form of a punch line or a cartoon) and then is motivated to resolve the incongruity either by retrieval
of information in the joke or cartoon or from his/her own storehouse of information” (42). To describe the process whereby this resolution is accomplished in a comedic form where it is necessary to resolve ambiguity, we will adopt the term disambiguation initially developed by Katz and Fodor in 1963. In terms of comedy, this refers to the process whereby we understand the true significance of how the various parts leading to the comedic experience fit together.

In some cases, the resolution may not appear to be a major factor in the creation of comedy. Think for example of a penguin happily waddling along a sand dune in the Sahara desert. The incongruity of an animal associated with cold, wet climates that is placed in a hot, dry context itself seems to be the important factor for the appreciation of humor. There is however an ambiguity in this case, perhaps more appropriately an enigma that needs to be resolved. Specifically, why is the penguin not seemingly harmed and in fact happy with its situation? It is not necessary to have a plausible answer to this question for the psychological resolution. Perhaps it is enough that at some level, we intuitively pose and attempt to answer the question. Suls describes how this process functions cognitively: “The process of incongruity resolution is akin to problem solving, but it appears to be much faster, almost automatic–more like […] having an ‘insight experience’ than solving a crossword puzzle” (43). If, on the other hand, the penguin were obviously suffering, dying, or dead the image would be much less humorous. Certainly there would still be the incongruity of the question of how and why the penguin was there in the first place, but this would be one to which we could posit a more plausible, no matter how unlikely, explanation. How a penguin could survive and be
happy in such a situation requires a logical step that is further removed from reality and therefore requires more cognitive effort on our part to attempt a resolution. Other elements such as pathos for the injured animal also affect our appreciation of the incongruity of the situation as well.

Most of the work done in describing how comedic resolution functions has dealt more specifically with verbal comedy, but much of it can be abstracted to refer to comedy in general. In attempting a psychological description of how jokes create humor, Kreitler, Drechsler, and Kreitler create a series of classifications for meaning structures in jokes and classify cognitive shifts by degree. They suggest that for comedy to be optimal it requires a medium sized cognitive shift that provokes a reevaluation of the situation (303). They state that such a cognitive shift “provides surprise and novelty, it poses a kind of riddle whose solution is intellectually gratifying. [. . .] Being of a medium degree implies that on the one hand it is not obvious and hence requires some mental effort and is cognitively tantalizing, while on the other hand it is not too difficult to comprehend and hence promises success in the cognitive task” (Kreitler, Drechsler, and Kreitler 312). Therefore the cognitive challenge becomes an important factor in the resolution and appreciation of incongruity.

At a semantic level we are typically able to disambiguate various potential ambiguities based on a number of factors including our encyclopedic knowledge, sign competence, context, and convention. Eco, in A Theory of Semiotics, takes up the Katz/Fodor model of disambiguation and modifies it to take into account ideas such as encyclopedic knowledge. Both the original model and Eco’s modification attempt to
explain how we differentiate between the various meanings of a polysemous word such as “bachelor” (Theory 96-110). Because of our sign competence we can distinguish between the various meanings of the word, for instance selecting the meaning of an unmarried male in preference to an academic degree or a young male seal that is without a mate during breeding time. Eco then goes on to critique an example of Katz and Fodor demonstrating how we typically disambiguate semantic problems without any trouble. The problem is specifically around an expression “our store sells alligator shoes” (Theory 110). Katz and Fodor question whether the sign can be read as both shoes made out of alligator skin and shoes made for alligators to wear. Eco states:

If one possesses a suitable semantic representation, the cultural unit ‘shoe’ must have been analyzed in such a way that its explicit semantic property of being worn by human beings will not allow one to amalgamate the sememe ‘shoe’ with the sememe ‘alligator’, which has the denotative marker ‘Animal.’ So, since one cannot read ‘shoes for alligators’, one is left with only one correct solution. Therefore no ambiguity is possible, except in Disneyland (but Disneyland, and the world of fairy tales in general, is a semantically revised universe within which the usual denotative and connotative properties of sememes are upset - though not at random, but following the rules of a complete semantic restructuring). (Theory 110)

Although Eco is not specifically addressing comedy here he does allude to what happens in a comic situation. The rules of the sememes (or units of meaning) are upset. They no longer follow the conventional rules of meaning and thus produce incongruity. This is
how comedy functions at a semiotic level, by playing with the various meanings of ambiguities and creating new semiotic associations and systems.

In something like a pun, this process of decoding is relatively simple. It involves an understanding and comparison of both meanings of a word. With some other types of humor the decoding process is more involved. Satterfield describes what happens in the encoding and decoding process of irony. “With the ironic sign, another step is necessary: after decoding, the reader must re-decode. That is, he decodes the straight sign or apparent meaning of the ironist, then because he finds it unsatisfactory, sets about to get at the meaning that is under that meaning” (154). He goes on to describe that with the ironic sign it is often the case that the sign denotes one thing which is the exact opposite of the intended meaning. An observer sees that the literal statement is in direct opposition with the context (Satterfield 155) and the resulting incongruity creates the ironic comedy.

Parody is also complicated because it is something that has to be disambiguated on a narrative level. “Much more important, however, is that the parodist codifies the message, supplying it with all those cues that will allow the reader a decoding at the situational level. The parodied text, in other words, must therefore be recognizable, and recognizable in such as way as to convey a model of the world different from that of the parodying text” (Bonafin 19). A reader of a parody must be constantly referencing the original text in order to make and understand comparisons between the original and the parody. Through this comparison, the reader can disambiguate the comedic meanings that the parodist intended and the incongruities of the two worlds are put into sharp contrast, creating narrative and situational comedy. (Parody will be discussed in more detail later.)
Before leaving the topic of resolution and disambiguation, it is important to point out that the resolution is not necessarily logical, complete, or coherent. Pierce sometimes uses examples of indices that are probable connections to their referents suggesting that the connection between sign and signifier does not necessarily have to be a real one (Clarke 45). Similarly, when we are discussing the resolution, it is not mandatory that the resolution make sense, be realistic, or plausible, because in a comic resolution, the resolution is playful (Attardo 144). Ironically, resolution is an important part in the appreciation of comedy even when it does not actually resolve anything. Perhaps going through the cognitive process of attempting the semiotic disambiguation of incongruities and ambiguities is sufficient, in itself, for the creation of comedy.

**Semiotic Subversion**

As discussed previously, humor is by nature subversive. This subversion can be in the intent of the piece. Satire, for instance, is often designed to subvert an existing system. This subversion, however, occurs on many other levels including textual, situational, visual, aural, semantic, and narrative levels. As Eco suggests, part of the pleasure and enjoyment of comedy is found precisely in this subversion or flaunting of the rules. “One must know to what degree certain behaviors are forbidden, and must feel the majesty of the forbidding norm, to appreciate their transgression” (“Frames” 6). There is a real psychological release of tension (as the relief theory suggests) in behavior that does not conform to the constraints of conventional standards. Bonafin suggests that in parody one of the central comic pleasures is the negation of the original text’s ideological content (19-20). Eco deals with this problem on a semantic level. He posits a case wherein a
semantically and grammatically correct sentence has a patently absurd signification. He explains this case:

The code does not stop us from understanding a proposition which is commonly believed to be false. It allows us to understand it and to understand that it is ‘culturally’ false. [...] One laughs because even though one realizes that the situation is unthinkable, one understands the meaning of the sentence. [...] The sentence appears to be ridiculously [...] meaningful insofar as its meaning conflicts with the meaning-rules we possess. Its meaning is unacceptable not because it is incomprehensible but because – if accepted – it implies the restructurization of our codes.

(Theory 64)

This, then, is the essence of comic subversion and the semiotic restructuring of signs for comic purposes. The comic sign is a serious sign that has been modified or subverted (Attardo 176). Giovanni Manetti has written some of the most useful ideas in this area. In discussing Dadaist art and its comedic and subversive nature, he suggests that the nonconformist positions of artists are playing with semiotic instruments to manipulate the signifying system (“Ready-made” 65). In a later article, written with Violi, they specifically draw a parallel between the comic and aesthetic experience. “If on one hand, therefore, conversational principles are permitted to reconstruct the implicit that is so common in every type of daily conversation, on the other hand, they constitute a kind of ‘ideal regularity’ of discourse, that can be explicitly violated to obtain specific effects, of comic or aesthetic type. Often certain types of irony are based on the violation of
conversational principles” (“Discorso” 131). In fact, many types of comedy can be created by violations of conversational rules, including jokes, puns, and wit. By breaking or subverting the rules, we create incongruities and new semiotic associations between previously unrelated signs and signifiers.

**Playing with Ambiguity and Paradoxical Juxtapositions**

We will now turn our attention to various ways in which comedy can and does exploit semiotic ambiguity and paradoxical juxtapositions. We will examine how multiple readings of these ambiguities and juxtapositions allow for the creation of comic incongruity and how these incongruities can be resolved. Several of these topics will be developed in later chapters, with specific examples from the artworks that we will examine.

**Puns**

Yuri Lotman argues that symbols are inherently polysemic until they are fitted into what he calls a “crystal grid of mutual connections” (87). This grid is very much like the concept of context that we discussed earlier, but the important point to understand from Lotman’s statement is that all signs remain polysemic until they are properly disambiguated into their appropriate meanings.

Puns are a perfect example of words that are not disambiguated, but keep their separate meanings. Attardo describes how puns differ from the typical ambiguity in words. “In the context of a sentence, the inherent ambiguity of linguistic units (words, morphemes) is reduced, and if all goes well—that is, the sentence is coherent and cohesive—the ambiguity is eliminated. Puns, however, preserve two senses of a linguistic
unit; therefore, puns exist only as a byproduct of sentential and/or textual disambiguation” (133). The ambiguity in puns is caused by the possibility of reading the punning word in two different ways. At a semiotic level, this occurs because the pun is a signifier with two signifieds or a sign with two interpretants. It also functions at an associative level, where the punning word either attaches two different unrelated ideas or separates ideas that are related (Milner 18). These two functions of comedic association are called paradigmatic and syntagmatic, respectively (Sherzer 338).

Puns appear to be common to the majority of cultures appearing across the world in linguistic forms, in visual forms, in the shapes of Chinese characters, and even in American Sign Language (Attardo 109). Even though the pun is a near ubiquitous phenomenon, it is limited, as is much of verbal humor, in its appeal. Attardo argues that the translation of puns across language boundaries is theoretically impossible. “The impossibility derives from the fact that puns associate, for instance, two signifiers (the sounds or characters used to represent a word) that are identical or similar and two signifieds (the meaning of a word) that are different. Because the relation between the signified and the signifiers is arbitrary, every language articulates it differently” (Attardo 29). Puns do not translate well because each language articulates polysemy differently. In addition, people who do not speak the language of the given pun at a native or near-native level, do not have the sign competence to correctly interpret and appreciate the pun. Even though the pun is typically looked down on as one of the lowest forms of humor, it is a topic that has fascinated scholars, and most of those who have written on linguistic humor, have paid some attention to the pun, often as a starting point for larger analysis, as we are
doing here. The pun will be further developed in conjunction with practical examples to a limited extent in chapter three in the context of verbal humor, and again in more detail in chapter five when they will be examined in the rapid-fire wit of the Marx Brothers.

**Multiple Meanings**

While the pun is a fairly specific form of verbal humor, the same principle can be applied to non-verbal areas as we will see in chapter four, and larger and more complex signifying systems. Just as a word may have multiple meanings, so too may a phrase, a sentence, a narrative, a literary symbol, a gesture, and even a smile. The very multiplicity of meaning of a sign of any kind allows for incongruity between those various meanings. Dorfles argues for the existence of a comic sign, suggesting that this sign is a kind of “polysign” that incorporates a variety of signifying systems and significations (*Artificio* 101-102). This suggests, to an extent, the polysemic nature of much of comedy which is structurally in conflict with itself as it creates incongruities. Violi argues that comedy is a potent way to attack pretenses of monosemy, opening the road to an effective dialectic of reality. It does this specifically through its multiplicity of linguistic uses rather than succumbing to a single codified model (“Ideologia” 129). This ambiguity again leaves room for multiple and incongruous symbolic returns (Manetti, “Clownesche” 252). When the meanings of signs or sign systems have not yet been completely fixed, there is room for play with the possibilities of meaning, and the opportunity for comedic subversion.

**Blurred Boundaries**

Because signs are by nature arbitrary, so too are many of the categories that we use to describe them. Danesi provides an interesting example about how the perception of
different types of color is conventionally defined. Some cultures see and define more basic color groups than Western culture and others define fewer. In Bassan (a Liberian language) the colors of blue and green would fall under a single category, whereas in English they are distinct (74-6). “At this universal level, what we see and what we say is made possible by the human capacity to generate relatively complex systems of abstract conceptual boundaried spaces. Yet the variations, from culture to culture, and from past to present to future, are astounding in their complexity” (Merrell 22). Because many types of boundaries are culturally defined and not clear-cut, this leaves room for ambiguity and incongruity. Of course in a typical situation, the incongruity is not recognized, and if it is, it can easily be cleared up with precision (Manetti, “Semiotica” 136). Comedy exploits these ambiguities. Merrell presents an interesting problem that can be applied to our study of the blurring or confusion of boundaries for comic purposes.

The name may be mistaken for the boundaried space, or the boundaried space may be mistaken for the content of the name when in fact a different boundaried space was intended to be the representation of the name. And so on. To consciously create a metaphor also entails such a ‘warp’ or (con)fusión. Conversely, at nonconscious levels, to interpret a metaphorical name literally or a literal name metaphorically is to (con)fuse name and boundaried space without knowing it. (Merrell 26-7)

Here Merrell suggests that by consciously confusing and fusing boundaried spaces one is creating a metaphor. Although it is outside of our stated project here to develop this idea, numerous scholars have noted the connection between metaphorical and comic language
(Attardo 176, Lotman 44, Kerbrat-Orecchioni 159). The central point is that the ambiguity between conventionally and culturally defined categories allows for the necessary play that is the breeding ground of the comic. When looking at such formally (and upon resolution of the incongruity formerly) distinct categories, we are forced to juxtapose the ideas or significations in an incongruous manner, much like the experience that Manetti and Violi describe as two senses of meaning which dissolve into each other so that they instantaneously change back and forth like the image of a geometric cube that appears to be showing both the front and back side of a cube (“Grammatica” 4). This experience is precisely what Manetti refers to when describing the experience of a clown show as “a totally invaded space, that functions as a single body, no longer with separation between individuals nor between individuals and things” (“Clownesche” 251). If ever there were an image or moment rife with incongruity this would be it.

**New Context**

If blurring the boundaries of categories and objects allows for comic incongruity, removing them and replacing them completely is an equally effective, yet distinct method of creating comic incongruity. Dorfles was the first to discuss how putting something in a new context can create comedy. It is a function of incongruous juxtapositions that need to be logically worked out.

In summarizing the reasons for this first motivation of the comic action it could be asserted [. . .] that anytime an action, gesture, event, word, image, becomes separated from its context, extracted from the normal meaning in which it is embedded, and artfully inserted in another context, in another
situation (in another place, time, lexicon, etc.) we will have the probable assurance of comedy. (Dorfles, Artificio 100-101)

Dorfles then goes on to explain that this change of context can affect a variety of forms, including changes from one dimension to another such as changes from animal to man, past to future, live-action to animation, etc. (Artificio 110). These changes in context are often the basis for comedy, not only on a linguistic level, but can be visual, structural, or narrative as well. Think of the endless string of movie comedies that are based on a premise of a poor person suddenly thrown into a rich person’s world (Chaplain’s City Lights [1931], Trading Places [1983], Pretty Woman [1990], Dave [1993] etc.). The reverse is often true as well, although more susceptible to pathos through depicting the rich person’s growth through learning to appreciate the plight of the poor (Sullivan’s Travels [1941], Roman Holiday, [1953], For Richer or Poorer [1997], etc.).

This change of context does not just remove one object from a context and put it into a new one; that is merely the incongruity part of the experience. It also requires a resolution, and this takes place, by connecting the object with its new context. “In principle, then, every object is available, capable of being separated from its original justification or context and remotivated as part of a new discourse” (Ulmer 39). On a textual or linguistic level, this is essentially a matter of a one-time resolution of the object with its new context. On a narrative level, this provides for continuing comic opportunities, as the individual or object in question, is constantly coming into conflicts with the new context or an unexpected textual frame (Violi and Manetti, Discorso 32-3) in a variety of ways and venues.
Changes Between the Sign and the Referent

Brilli suggests that there are two ways to create comedy by the subversive use of a word. The first he describes is a relativization of a word (or in our case any sign or signifying system) in a new context where it maintains its original meaning. This describes the situation we discussed in the last section. The other way that a word can be used, he argues, is as a parody of the word, using the word with a diametrically opposed meaning (18). We will borrow Dorfles’ description of this phenomenon as a change of relationships between a sign and its referent (Artificio 102). While this change has been alluded to earlier, it is useful to mention it in conjunction with the section on context. With a change in context, the sign is removed from its typical signifying environment. Another way of looking at a change between a sign and its referent, however, is that it is a case where its typical signifying environment is removed from it. For Dorfles, the kind of paradoxical relationship caused by such a change is central to the definition of the comic. “The comic [. . .] is a type of language (or better, a deformation of a normal language) that it is characterized for the negative value or paradoxical premise of the sign” (Dorfles, Artificio 103). Because the sign has turned against its own meaning, it creates a semiotic incongruity and, as we have discussed, this allows us to experience it as comedy.

Repetition, Repetition, Repetition

This section heading does not, in fact, refer to the somewhat heavy emphasis we have placed on the major themes of this chapter including, semiotic subversion, ambiguity, and incongruity (although an argument could be made for that point of view). It does refer, however, to the creation of comedy through repetition. As mentioned earlier, the
area of repetition has been described as a weakness in the incongruity theory in that it has
difficulty trying to explain this phenomenon. Even though Bergson’s theory on the
mechanical does an adequate job of dealing with the problem, a semiotic use of
incongruity can be illuminating in this case. Repetition sets a standard; it creates its own
semiotic system, with an expected outcome based on an established convention. To be
sure, this convention is an abbreviated one, but it does set up a certain set of rules it is
expected to follow. In the knock-knock joke that goes: “Knock-Knock. Who’s there?
Banana. Banana Who? Knock-Knock. Who’s there? Banana . . .” and so on, there is a
pattern that is established. While some people may find the absurd incongruity of
repeating this joke without a punch line humorous in itself, it is not until the end when the
ture incongruity hits. “Orange. Orange Who? Orange you glad I didn’t say banana?”
While there are some more complex issues at work here such as the paronymic pun of
“Orange” for “Aren’t,” much of the humor lies in the incongruity of the answer that goes
against the pattern established in the rest of the joke. This is a case where a reversal is
used to create an incongruity with the isotopy that was established through repetition. In
other cases, the incongruity is created through the repetition itself. While there are many
repetitive elements to life, these are not typically considered comical. We brush our teeth
three times a day, yet this is rarely the subject of a stand-up comedian’s monologue. If we
brushed our teeth three times in a row, however, that could be considered comical,
because the brushing is no longer logically motivated, but appears to be an absurd
incongruity. Part of the comic effect of repetition then in a comic artwork is the
condensed and illogical nature of that repetition. In a running gag, a comic effect may also
be created through timing or the unexpected reappearance of a comic moment, or through variation on the theme. Once the repetition has been established, there is a certain amount of interest and cognitive excitement that we experience by observing in what creative ways a comic effect can be varied and reused. This is a case where the creators of a comic effect are undermining and playing with the structure that they set up to create a comic effect, to create a comic effect. Even though the previous sentence was not particularly funny, it does illustrate how repetition and cognitive challenge can be used to involve observers who are forced to cognitively disambiguate the intended meaning.

**Irony, Parody, and Satire, Oh My!**

It is worthwhile here to spend some space exploring the forms of irony, parody, and satire in more depth. Many of the examples that we will look at in later chapters will involve some or all of these types of comic constructions. An important thing to remember as we are looking at these forms is that the way that comedy is explained by semiotic theory at a basic level, is the same explanation of these types of comedy, only on a different scale. These ideas are repeated and developed here to illustrate how a semiotic theory of comedy, is relatively uncomplicated, yet can be used to address a variety of complicated forms. Although these three are distinct comedic forms, they are similar in a variety of ways which allow for crossover and a multiplicity of uses in any given comic artwork.

Irony, in its simplest form is saying one thing while meaning another, or what Mizzau calls using “antiphrases” (“Ironia” 188). “This is a truly remarkable form of discourse, based on exploiting the incongruities and complexities of an experience or a
situation” (Danesi 106). Danesi alludes to some of the complexity of dealing with irony which requires a fairly substantial amount of sign competence and an ability to carefully discern shades of meaning. The main danger of irony is reading it straight and thus completely missing the intended meaning. “Because the ironic sign is by nature unstable, we find it confusing when we find it at all. And because what it implies often opposes what it says explicitly, ignorance of the conventions by which it functions can be disastrous to anyone trying to make sense of a work” (Satterfield 149). The reader or observer is required to be able to discern that there is communication and meaning taking place on more than just the most obvious level. The reader then is forced to return to the text to compare what is actually said to what is the intended meaning and this creates the experience of incongruity (Mizzau, “Ironia” 195).

There are two basic types of irony defined as verbal and situational irony. Verbal irony takes place on a semantic level and situational irony takes place on a narrative level. “While the rhetorical ironic sign is a word or group of words, the situational ironic sign is an event, a group of events, or a condition. Just as rhetorical ironic signs have double meanings—one for the naive and one for the sophisticated—so situational ironic signs have double meaning” (Satterfield 157). Both of these phenomena can be explained in the same semiotic terms on different scales. “In verbal irony, the opposition is between what the author seems to be saying and what he really says (or intends that the reader understand). In situational irony, the opposition is between what is expected by the innocent victims (which may include the reader) and what actually occurs, the opposition thus residing in the events rather than in the language of the recounting of the events” (Satterfield 151).
In both cases, there is an opposition in the form of an incongruity between two different levels of signification. Mizzau argues that irony cannot be too explicit or it will lose its effectiveness. The more implicit it is or the less obvious, the more effective it can be in providing not only comedy, but critiques as well. She refers to this paradoxical situation as being “openly masked” (“Ironia” 192). This incongruity in the very nature of how irony functions shows that irony is ironically, ironic.

At a structural level, one of the major differences between irony and parody, is that parody creates incongruity in comparison to another text, while irony creates incongruity in comparison with itself. Parody is a broader concept because it can directly address things like the literary tradition, the social context, and public expectations (Bonafin 17) that satire does not structurally incorporate. Parody uses an existing text and alters it for comedic purposes. It does this by creating incongruities between the original and the parodying text. “From the point of view of the ‘competence’ required of the parodist, we are confronted with a mechanism of linguistic hybridization, that presupposes the co-presence of two languages–that of the parodist and that of the parodied, [...]–but that in any case necessitates that the parodist has learned the language of parodies” (Bonafin 16). Likewise the reader or observer of the parody must have mastered both languages in order to understand and appreciate the full meaning and the comic elements of the parody.

Brilli defines the satire that he is studying as a “mosaic of citations” and suggests that the majority of satires function in this way (18). Like parody, satire comments on something external to itself. As such, it requires a broad cultural competence. Unlike parody, it is not limited to one text, but can comment on a variety of signifying systems
and is a text in itself. Parody could function as a narrative on its own, but would not produce comedy without an ability to refer to the original text. Satire can deal not only with context, but also the body of previous literature and signifying systems as a whole (Brilli 17). “Satiric language plays deliberately on the ambiguity of its codification. Whether or not the addressee resorts to an extra textual language (citations, imitations, parody, mimicry of historic language, epic, denotative, etc.), or whether it forces on the reader its own language it, at the same time, communicates the signs of its own codification” (Brilli 20). Satire then takes a variety of subjects and undermines their specific meanings. In destroying and subverting the meaning of other texts it creates its own. Like irony and parody, satire creates its own incongruity within itself. This incongruity cannot be resolved in referring to the original citations, but must be formulated from the satire itself. “Satire is resolved in the paradox of a language that offers the signs of its own codification even though it omits the interpretive keys” (Brilli 20).

**Crossing Boundaries**

As I hope is apparent by now, semiotics as a methodology is quite flexible. It is able to address a variety of topics in a variety of ways, because it is the study of how we make meaning and if something has meaning, then semiotics has something to say about it. Barry has argued that semiotics is an ideal way to address how we make meaning in art (xi). He further argues, “Yet if the current—and laudable—spirit of interdisciplinarity is to flourish at all, while even individual disciplines multiply their own internal complexities, a level of sophisticated, shared dialogue must be found. Semiotics, I hold, offers just the
platform for such a discourse” (Barry xiv). Semiotics can speak across disciplines because all disciplines at some level, deal with meaning either in what they study or how they understand and talk about it.

Comedy is a mode of discourse that cuts across various disciplines. It is obvious in the arts, particularly those that are textually based or have narrative, but it is also an important topic in psychology, communication theory, business, entertainment, popular culture, and sociology. Norrick has argued: “Semiotics, as an interdisciplinary science grounded in the nature of human cognition and concerned with codes of all types, has consequently come to be a most fruitful approach to this code of humor” (Norrick 113). Comedy touches a wide range of topics, yet follows some fairly clearly defined semiotic patterns. Comedy has meaning for us in our daily lives, yet part of its appeal is that the meaning is sometimes so difficult to define. It is information, yet it provides us more than that. Umberto Eco in discussing information states:

Information is a value depending on the richness of possible choices; the different coded readings of the sememes, along with the manifold contextual and circumstantial interpretations, constitute multiple choices which can even be reduced to a binary selection. This information of the message is only reduced by the addressee when he selects a definitive interpretation. In the case of aesthetic messages which require the simultaneous grasping of multiple senses, this informational quality of the message remains unreduced. (Eco, Theory 140)

Comedy is one of these aesthetic messages. It provides us with multiple, sometimes
contradictory, meanings. These meanings can be confusing and perplexing, yet rather than be disturbed by the disorder this creates in our minds, we rejoice in the experience in a way that is similar, yet distinct from other aesthetic experiences such as listening to the final chords of a Beethoven symphony or gazing up at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. It is just as unnecessary to have a degree in musicology to appreciate Beethoven as it is to understand Schopenhauer to appreciate the Marx Brothers, yet, with that degree in musicology, we can appreciate some of the nuances and significance of the music that others, who do not have that level of musical competence, will not appreciate. Likewise, if we increase our sign competence, not only of the signifying systems which comedy subverts, but of the rules of comedy itself, we can increase our appreciation of comedy. Not that we will necessarily find things funnier, but we will understand how artists and comedians lead us to the comic. Semiotics can provide a road map with which we can follow the signs of comedy.
[Gilbert] made his reputation from comic verse and his fortune from comic opera, yet thought of himself primarily as a serious writer. He who contrived some of the most whimsical lords of misrule in all literature lived scrupulously by the rule himself and demanded that others do so, too.

- James Ellis (qtd. in Henkle 200)

[Sullivan] has all the ability to make him a great composer, but he wilfully throws his opportunity away. A giant may play at times, but Mr Sullivan is always playing.

- The London Figaro (qtd. in Jacobs 112)

Chapter 3: I am the Very Model of a Semiotical Analysis - The Pirates of Penzance and Linguistic and Narrative Semiotic Humor

In this chapter, we examine Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta The Pirates of Penzance as a case study for further developing semiotic theories of humor. First, we will begin exploring and elucidating some types of linguistic humor and how they function in the operetta. Linguistic terminology is presented to describe the process of the creation of various types of linguistic comedy. Semiotic processes are used to describe how the philosophical definitions of these terms function at a linguistic level. We will then expand our discussion to explore how comedy functions within the semiotic systems of theater, including a discussion of how comedy is created in performance. To finish the chapter, we will study how comedy can undermine structure on a narrative level, relying primarily on the semiotic approach to narrative developed in the writings of French semiologist, Roland Barthes.
Playing with Words

To begin our discussion of linguistic humor, we will rely more heavily on the linguistic tradition of semiotics initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure. As we discussed in the previous chapter, Saussure is concerned only with the signifier and the signified, leaving out the object as unimportant. For instance, in dealing with the concept of a “pirate” in English, Saussure would define the signifier as the sound produced by speaking what is written in English as “pirate.” The signified is the mental image that is an agglomeration of the characteristics related to the type of maritime bandit called a pirate including eye patches, peg legs, parrots, cutlasses, sailing ships, and buried treasure. An actual physical pirate would be unimportant to Saussure (although he might have thought differently about that had he been a sailor rather than a linguist). It is important also to recall here that the signifier is arbitrary and exists by convention. The importance of this quality becomes particularly evident when discussing verbal or linguistic humor.

In order to examine how Gilbert, as the lyricist of the famous team, accomplishes this revolt against the serious and undermines sign meanings at a linguistic level, we will look at several types of linguistic forms of humor. In each case, we see an undermining of conventional signification. This is possible because, as Saussure suggests, signs are arbitrary and do not have fixed causal meaning at a linguistic level. Therefore they can, to some extent, be changed. This process is what Roland Barthes calls “a sliding within the codes—meaning remains but pluralized, cheated, without law of content, message, truth” (Barthes, Image 206-7).

We will begin by looking briefly at the pun. As we discussed in the previous
chapter, “From a semiotic perspective, a pun can be seen to be a signifier that stands for two signifieds” (Berger 45). This frequently takes the form of a homonym. It is important to remember that the signifier is not necessarily the same exact word in each case, but there is some room for words that sound close enough. In linguistic terms this is called a paronym. Paronyms occur frequently in The Pirates of Penzance (hereafter Pirates). Often these appear as forced rhymes where two words that do not normally have the same sound are forced into a rhyming relationship. In the first song of Pirates, “Pour O Pour the Pirate Sherry,” Gilbert manages to rhyme “fit to fly” with “revelry” (121), a considerable stretch. In “When Frederic was a Little Lad” we have a less egregious, but still strained match with Gilbert rhyming “gyrate” with “pirate.” Looking at these rhymes from a semiotic perspective, there is a connection formed by the homophonic nature of the rhymes. This becomes humorous because we recognize that the words do not really fit together and that some rules of pronunciation have been bent in order to make this connection work. Barry argues that structurally rhyme creates meaning (65), and in this case, the meaning is undermined by the paradoxical relationship of the rhymed words. The incongruity of two words that rhyme, but are really not supposed to, creates the comedy of the situation. Sherzer suggests that puns often go beyond this surface resemblance: “while puns minimally point syntagmatically to two referents, they are often even more complicated, adding to the thickness of the cohesion of the discourse in which they are located” (340). A good example of one of these more complex puns occurs in “When Frederic was a Little Lad” mentioned earlier. During the course of this song, Ruth, the Nurse, reveals that the reason that Frederic was apprenticed to the Pirate King,
which is the act that created the central conflict of the plot, was because she
misunderstood the word “pilot” for “pirate.” This provides a nice illustration for how the
superiority theory can be used at a semiotic level. We laugh at the foolish nurse who not
only fails to differentiate the two words, but also does not let common sense dissuade her
from an obviously perilous and foolish venture. The incongruity of a pirate who takes on
a regular apprentice also adds to the humor of the situation. In addition to the
homophonic similarities of “pilot” and “pirate,” the two concepts are also semiotically
linked in terms of many of the connotations that they carry. Both are associated with
ships and the sea. Additionally, a pilot of a pirate ship would, in fact, combine the two
concepts or signifiers in one person or signified. Perhaps Ruth’s mistake was not so
egregious when examined in that context.

Ruth is a figure who is susceptible to numerous instances of misunderstanding.
She is a person who does not fully comprehend the complex connotations of linguistic
codes or conversational maxims that allow language to be disambiguated. When Frederic
is trying to decide whether or not to marry the much older Ruth, he is hampered by the
fact that he has been at sea since he was eight years old and wants to know if Ruth is
beautiful before he marries her. In discussing appropriate ages for marriage (a
conventionally agreed upon societal code) Frederic states, “A lad of twenty-one usually
looks for a wife of seventeen” (125). Ruth, misunderstanding the context of the
statement, replies, “A wife of seventeen! You will find me a wife of a thousand!” under
the impression that more is better (although in this case, she is not sure to what more
refers). Frederic returns to the original context of age from which Ruth has mistakenly
departed and says, “I shall find you a wife of forty-seven, and that is quite enough” (125). He then tries another approach and asks her “Ruth, tell me candidly, and without reserve: compared with other women–how are you?” She again misunderstands the question and replies inappropriately revealing her inability to correctly navigate the sea of linguistic codes in which she is immersed. “I will answer you truthfully, master–I have a slight cold, but otherwise I am quite well” (125). Here Gilbert is playing with his audience as well. The start of Ruth’s reply is as serious as is the start of Frederic’s question which asks her to remove possible ambiguities from her answer. Because Ruth starts to answer the question in a serious manner, this sets up the expectation in the audience of a serious answer. Ultimately, Ruth provides a trivial answer about her state of health setting up an incongruity between the serious codification of the question, and the frivolous nature of the answer. Each of the two different directions that the text of Ruth’s reply are what Greimas calls isotopies (as discussed in the previous chapter) and the incongruity between the two opposing directions of these isotopies creates the humor of the situation.

Another punning instance in the operetta is the extended scene where the Major-General tells the Pirate King that he is an orphan in order to be spared by the pirates, who are all themselves, orphans. From the text of the operetta alone, this misunderstanding could be perplexing (some of the issues of semiotics and performance will be discussed later in the chapter), but in performance, the two characters pronounce “orphan” and “often” as homophones. The text of the scene reads as follows:

GEN. I ask you, have you ever known what it is to be an orphan?

KING. Often!
GEN. Yes, orphan. Have you ever known what it is to be one?

KING. I say, often.

ALL [disgusted]. Often, often, often. [Turning away]

GEN. I don't think we quite understand one another. I ask you, have you ever known what it is to be an orphan, and you say ‘orphan’. As I understand you, you are merely repeating the word ‘orphan’ to show that you understand me.

KING. I didn't repeat the word often.

GEN. Pardon me, you did indeed.

KING. I only repeated it once.

GEN. True, but you repeated it.

KING. But not often.

GEN. Stop: I think I see where we are getting confused. When you said ‘orphan’, did you mean ‘orphan—a person who has lost his parents, or ‘often’—frequently?

KING. Ah! I beg pardon—I see what you mean—frequently?

GEN. Ah! you said often—frequently.

KING. No, only once.

GEN. [irritated] Exactly—you said often, frequently, only once. (135-6).

Here we have a misunderstanding between the pirates and the General because they are understanding a single homophonic signifier as two separate signifieds. While initially this is a simple mistake (much more believable with British accents than it would be with...
American accents), Gilbert ups the ante, complicating the misunderstanding further with each exchange. When they finally figure out between them that they are using two different words, they still manage to confuse the issue. In this case, there is a slight shift from the humor of the pun which has been resolved, to a grammatical misunderstanding, caused by the ambiguity of the language. When the General asks the Pirate King if he said “often” meaning “frequently” the Pirate King misunderstood him to mean did he frequently say the word “often.” The last line, by the General, while syntactically correct, is so logically complicated, by the various descriptions regarding the frequency of the utterance, that it takes some time to disambiguate the sentence. Part of the pleasure in the humor is the cognitive effort this requires.

Another type of linguistic humor is created through the undermining of standard societal assumptions. Because each of us is immersed in a web of culture and signifying practices, we approach texts and situations with assumptions of how they should be read and understood. In the second act of Pirates, when Frederic’s sense of duty calls him to leave his beloved Mabel, she promises to wait for him for the sixty-three years that he will be gone. In an upbeat duet, they promise their fidelity “Till we are wed, and even after” (147). It is normally assumed by society that there is a much stronger requirement of fidelity after marriage than before it. The promise to be faithful for such a long time until the wedding strengthens the assumption that the fidelity will continue after marriage. Textually, Gilbert breaks up the line with a comma, creating a pause between the two halves of the sentence. This creates the feeling that the “even after” part is an addendum, one that is unnecessary because it is already assumed. Musically, Sullivan reinforces this
same separation by inserting a pause between the two halves of the sentence. By stating the unnecessary, Gilbert calls into question the fidelity of the two parties and assumes that there is some chance that they would have been unfaithful after marriage. This is in conflict with the long wait leading up to their marriage during which they have already promised to be faithful.

Another linguistic technique that Gilbert uses to produce comedy is his use of overly verbose language. Expressions like the Pirate King’s charge to Frederic to reveal some damaging information about General Stanley are examples of this verbosity. “Speak out, I charge you by that sense of conscientiousness to which we have never yet appealed in vain” (144). This sentence is somewhat convoluted and involved, and the cognitive effort of following and deciphering the expression can be a pleasurable experience in itself. Here, Gilbert is playing with the format of the language to see how much he can get away with. This tendency to verbosity is greatly magnified in the songs which are shaped by an artificial codification that must comply with structural constraints created by meter and rhyme. One verse describing the pirates’ unlikely desire to wed the General’s daughters will suffice to show how complicated the language becomes. “Here’s a first-rate opportunity/ To get married with impunity,/ And indulge in the felicity/ Of unbounded domesticity./ You shall quickly be parsonified,/ Conjugally matrimonified,/ By a doctor of divinity,/ Who resides in this vicinity” (132). In addition to the verbosity of the language, we see here how Gilbert must deform the language to adhere to the structure dictated by the rhyme and rhythmic scheme. To do this, he invents new words such as “parsonified” and “matrimonified.” At a semiotic level, he uses the noun signs “parson” and
“matrimony” and transforms them into verb forms. These words are not real, but are understandable since they still point to the original meanings of the words or to connotations related to them (a parson performs a wedding). They also follow grammatical rules for sentence construction. Because they are not real words, but function like real words, this creates an incongruity in the text.

Euphemism is another technique that Gilbert uses for humorous purposes. The invading band of pirates finds the General’s daughters, and their immediate intentions are to haul in the nearest clergyman and marry them on the spot. Obviously, real pirates (people who by definition live outside of the realm of law) would be more likely to rape the women than be concerned with a societally sanctioned sexual union. While Gilbert was constrained by his venue and his time period in terms of what he could depict on stage, he is obviously using this comparison of rape-marriage for comic purposes. While the idea of rape is very much peripheral to the wholesome tone of the operetta and indeed to the entire period for which he is writing (Henkle 185), it would still be informing and influencing the audience’s reaction to the narrative situation. When a desire as inappropriate for invading pirates as coerced marriages is depicted, it creates an incongruity between the expected and the actual or what should be and what is actually depicted. As Umberto Eco suggests, the underlying rule is understood, but the comic effect would be ruined if it were to be spelled out (“Frames” 4). Thus we can laugh because we experience the incongruity based on our cultural presuppositions that are unformulated, but still influence our perception of the situation.
Understatement is also used to create an incongruity between the seriousness of a subject and the light manner in which it is treated. For example, when Frederic tells Mabel that he is indentured to the Pirate captain for an additional sixty-three years, he sings to her “In 1940 I of age shall be,/ I’ll then return, and claim you–I declare it!” She replies, in all seriousness, “It seems so long!” (147). There is no question that considering a human life-span and the conventional age range for young people to get married, that sixty-three years does not just seem like a long time, it really is a long time by all objective standards. Her understatement creates an incongruity between her actual statement that it seems long and the reality of the expected statement that it is long.

Wordplay is another technique that Gilbert uses to create comedy in Pirates. Wordplay, as the name suggests, is simply playing with the qualities of language and the signified objects and semiotic systems that language describes. After arriving in a secluded spot on the beach, the General’s daughters conclude that they must be the first ones to ever set foot on the spot (128). One of the daughters suggests that the mermaids could have been there first, but they conclude that since mermaids do not have feet, they do not count. Gilbert is playing with semantics here and using the phrase “set foot” as a metonymous expression standing for the idea of having been in a location. Because “set foot” can also be read literally, that ambiguity allows for the wordplay around the idea of mermaids who have no feet. This is a clear example of what Manetti describes as a conflict between abstract and concrete meanings (“Semiotica” 148) or what Milner calls the metaphorical and literal (21).

Another interesting example of wordplay and the use of faulty logic occurs when
General Stanley’s conscience is tormented by his lie to the pirates that he is an orphan. He is concerned with staining the names of his ancestors in the chapel on his property (139). Frederic reminds him that he purchased the property only a year ago and so the deceased in the chapel are not his ancestors. Here we have another interesting multiple reading of a single signifier. One’s ancestors, by definition, are biologically those from whom one descended. Stanley however, provides an alternative understanding of that relationship. “Frederic, in this chapel are ancestors: you cannot deny that. With the estate, I bought the chapel and its contents. I don’t know whose ancestors they were, but I know whose ancestors they are, and I shudder to think that their descendant by purchase (if I may so describe myself) should have brought disgrace upon [them]” (139). Stanley argues that ancestors are physical objects. Because he purchased the chapel and the ancestors in them they are his property. Therefore they are his ancestors, in an alternative and unusual sense. Calling himself a “descendent by purchase” is another way of playing with words and their meanings to create a novel relationship with the conventional meaning that is still semiotically connected to the original.

Contradiction, or reversals, are another way that Gilbert subverts language for comic purposes. The use of phrases such as “unbounded domesticity” (132) illustrate this. Domesticity, or devotion to home life, is bounded literally by the walls of the home and socially and culturally as well. Other reversals are developed at greater length. General Stanley objects to “pirates as sons-in-law” (135), a reasonable expectation for a man in his position and in consideration of the reputation of pirates. The Pirate King, however, states, “We object to Major-Generals as fathers-in-law. But we waive that point. We do
not press it. We look over it” (135), suggesting that they are taking the higher moral ground and condescending to accept the General as a father-in-law. Here the incongruity of the reversal, a pirate or person of low social status objecting on principle to being related to a Major-General, someone of very high social status, is comical.

Paradoxical relationships between words and associated concepts also provide a source of comedy in Pirates. The Pirate King sings to the General who has just claimed to be an orphan. “Although our dark career/ Sometimes involves the crime of stealing,/ We rather think that we’re/ Not altogether void of feeling./ Although we live by strife,/ We’re always sorry to begin it,/ For what, we ask, is life / Without a touch of Poetry in it?” (136-7). Here there is a paradoxical relationship between the crime of “stealing” and the pirates’ good qualities of “feeling.” These two words are presented as having opposite connotations (bad and good respectively), but they are forcibly related by being rhymed with each other. The relationship between strife and life functions in the same way and reinforces the paradox inherent in the stanza. This is a technique that Gilbert uses repeatedly in comparing words with differing connotations, including words such as “stride,” which has a forceful connotation, and “hide,” which has a submissive connotation (150).

The use of metaphor is also a productive way to create incongruous relationships between signifying systems. A good example of this is found in the first act, when we are introduced to the Pirate King song. Here we have a comparison of the leader of this band of cutthroats to a well respected monarch. The monarch does not fare well in the comparison. The Pirate King prides his way of life where at least he is honest about his
Gilbert is well known for his witty wordplay and there is no better example of this than in the song “I am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General.” Here Gilbert seems to rejoice in creating and pulling off challenging rhymes. He manages to find or create rhymes for words as complex as “mathematical,” “calculus,” “paradox,” “Heliogabalus,” and “Aristophanes.” Indeed, there seems to be no good reason for rhyming “lot o’ news” with “hypotenuse” except to show that he can and that there is fun to be had in playing with the sounds of the words. D.H. Monro describes this as “a certain humorous effect which comes from juggling with words as sounds” (67-8). Another important factor in the effect of this song is the fast speed at which it is sung, heightening the emotional reaction and showcasing the virtuosity of the singer. This song has a larger satirical purpose, which is to present a comedic look at a military figure who essentially knows nothing about the military. The subjects that the Major-General sings about are related to academic knowledge, including mathematics, art, theater, history, music, literature and the like. He professes to have less knowledge of important military tactics than a “novice in a
nunnery” (134). Yet despite this seeming deficiency for an important military position, he repeatedly is hailed as the “very model of a modern Major-General,” suggesting that all Major Generals should have the qualities and do have the deficiencies that he possesses. Certainly, the incongruities inherent in the opposing sign systems of a military figure with no military knowledge are sufficiently humorous in themselves, but Gilbert is actually satirizing a real person, Viscount Sir Garnet Wolseley (Goodman 173). This man did not take offense at this satirical look at his character and was, in fact, quite amused with it. He memorized the General's introductory speech and often sang it to entertain his family (Hibbert 111-112).

This kind of complex comic creation shows some of the multiple layers in which comedy can function at a semiotic level. Within the context of this song, comedy is being created textually, phonetically, temporally, musically, and culturally. Because semiotics is the study of all kinds of sign systems, it is capable of addressing how the undermining of the conventional signification of signs can produce comedy in all of these signifying systems.

**Semiotics and Theater**

There is a significant body of work dealing with the theater as a semiotic phenomenon. Semiotic approaches to theater have dealt with a variety of theatrical elements including the text of the play, the acting, lighting, speech tone, mime, gesture, movement, corporal expression, makeup, hair style, costume, props, the playing space, music, sound effects, (Donahue 22-25), scenery (Barry 90) and even the theater as an architectural space (Carlson). While a detailed examination of the body of work about the
semiotics of theater, is beyond the scope of this work, it is useful to explain some of the basic concerns of that field and which semiotic elements can become prone to an undermining of conventional semiotic meaning. This section will briefly introduce a few of the major themes of semiotics in the theater.

Much of the early work on semiotics in theater was done by the Prague School of semioticians, starting in the 1930s. Nöth describes one of the central approaches of this group to theater. “For the Prague structuralists, theater is a place of semiotic transformation: Material objects, events, and behavior which have a practical, nonsemiotic function in everyday life are transformed into signs by being presented in the aesthetic context of the stage” (363). The stage is simultaneously a real and artificial space. It is artificially created to represent some other space, yet at the same time it is a real space with real scenery and real people moving in it. This dichotomy adds to the polysemous nature of the theatrical sign, which conveys both real and artificial meanings. As a result of the artificial nature of the stage, everything is a construct and thus conveys meaning, whether or not that is the specific intent. The physical space in which the play is set means, even if that meaning is a reflection on the architectural style of the age or the financial constraints of the individual production. At the same time, because the theatrical space is so semiotically charged, there is the possibility for a shorthand in representing reality, ideas, or events. For the Prague School, “the semiotic character of the stage gives to the theater and its practitioners an enormous freedom. A simple pillar can represent a church, a window stands for a house, a puppet can represent a person, the sound of a jackhammer can evoke a coal mine. The only limits placed on representation in the theater are the boundaries of the human imagination” (Donahue 22).
One of the central complications of theatrical semiotics and one which allows for certain forms of comedy to exist, is the polysemous nature of the theatrical sign (Nöth 364). Not only can an individual sign mean a variety of things, but there are a variety of semiotic systems in which they can mean. Nöth describes the complexity of theatrical semiotics. “As sign, it participates in processes of aesthetic communication. As play and show, it exhibits iconic and indexical signs; as drama, it has specific actantial structures; as written text and visual and non-verbal performance, theater is a code participating in still other modes of semiosis” (361). This illustrates the rich field of codes that comedy can semiotically undermine.

One of the major relationships that has been studied in the context of the semiotics of theater is the dichotomy between the written theatrical text and the performed theatrical text (Nöth 362-4). Alter describes some of the problems that a semiotic study of theater has encountered. “The literary fallacy leads to the assimilation of theater to the text only and results in its reduction to the status of a particular genre of literature. The performing fallacy, increasingly popular, leads to the assimilation of theater to the performance only, and results in its reduction to the status of a particular genre of show” (qtd. in Nöth 362). Obviously, by focusing too much on one of these areas, the other suffers and this ultimately provides too limited a view of the power of theater to create multiple layers of meaning. This is also true of limiting the study of semiotics in the theater to either of these two areas to the neglect of other factors such as performance space, lighting, costuming, acting, gesture, etc. Helbo suggests that initially scholarship naturally leaned
towards the written text because it drew heavily from existing semiotic theory that had been done in literature and film (565). Donahue argues that there is a connection between the written text and the performance, and this occurs through a semiotic process. “In effect, the director takes the playwright’s text, which is an encoded message, and partially decodes it by making certain interpretations, fitting the text to the physical constraints of the playing space, and expanding it through the imaginative use of his or her own concepts of the drama and the theater. The director is in fact re-encoding the text by creating a production plan” (Donahue 27). During this process of re-encoding, there is the opportunity to create comedy in a variety of ways. Three elements that I would like to discuss I will briefly name here as working with the text, adding to the text, and working against the text. For the purposes of this discussion of performance, the performance of *Pirates* will be the 1983 film version directed by Wilford Leach unless otherwise noted. It is important to note that this film version is based on a theatrical production so the semiotic conventions we discuss are largely theatrical rather than filmic in nature.

**Working with the Text**

Often there are comedic elements written into the text of the play that are funny in terms of the language used or the situation portrayed. Indeed, some comic elements are embedded in the text and can only be conveyed verbally (Donahue 19). The director can emphasize these elements through blocking, costumes, sets, lighting, the actor’s emphasis, what stage business accompanies them etc. The director may also choose to not emphasize these elements or to downplay them through similar methods. This could include rewording the material or cutting it entirely. It could also be accomplished
through how the actors give the lines or act in the scene. One example from Pirates occurs when Frederic reveals himself for the first time to the General’s multitude of daughters on the beach. He sings to them a melodramatic plea for their love trying to impress them with his sincerity, good looks, and his appeal to their sense of duty. To add to this mood, the director accentuates Frederic’s melodramatic singing with equally over-the-top movements and even a homage to the sexy hip swaying and breathy singing style of Elvis Presley.

Adding to the Text

Another way that the director can create comedy in this process is through additions or modifications to the play that are not derived from a reading of the text. This often takes the form of stage business or physical or visual comedy. There are numerous examples in this performance of Pirates. When the Pirate King hands Frederic his sword in Act I, he cuts his hand and winces in comic pain. Likewise he bumps his head, stabs himself in the foot, and otherwise suffers physical harm in a comedic way. During the song “Sighing Softly to the River,” the pirates who are in the process of sneaking up on the General to slay him, sing backup to the general and otherwise comically hide in the background, unnoticed by the distracted General. None of this is, of course, written explicitly in the play text. Much of it, including the basic premise of the hiding pirates, no doubt descends from the original production and staging of the play, but there are obviously new and unique elements added to newer productions. For instance, in the film version of Pirates, the pirates sing some of their lines in this song underwater. Hearing them gurgle their lines and seeing the bubbles on the surface of the river as they sing
beneath is quite comical. These additions to the text can also be extra-textual material. In the film version of *Pirates*, there is a version of the song “My Eyes Are Fully Open” which is originally from Gilbert and Sullivan’s later play *Ruddigore*. The song has an extremely fast tempo making it very difficult to understand. Indeed, this is one of the ironic points that the song emphasizes by ending with the verse, “This particularly rapid, unintelligible patter/ Isn’t generally heard, and if it is it doesn’t matter!” (392). In addition to making appropriate changes for names and the situation of the song, there is an additional significant change. The change is made in the second verse where Ruth sings, “But at present I’m afraid I am as mad as any hatter,/ So I’ll sing this song from Ruddigore, it really doesn’t matter” (*Pirates*). This is a type of inside joke that, as we discussed in chapter two, requires a fairly specific sign competency on the part of the audience. It not only requires that the person be able to understand the purposefully unintelligible dialogue, but also requires a fairly significant familiarity of Gilbert and Sullivan’s oeuvre to be aware of this lesser-known play. This reference to another work by the creative team that breaks the reality of the play world (a comic technique in itself) is not without precedence in Gilbert and Sullivan. In the General’s song “I am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General,” the General states that he can “whistle all the airs from that infernal nonsense *Pinafore*” (134), referring to Gilbert and Sullivan’s previous collaboration *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

Adding to the text for comic purposes can also be accomplished through novel interpretations of the text. For example, when Frederic is asking the Pirate King if Ruth is plain, the Pirate King responds in the text with a straightforward “Oh, Ruth, is very well,
very well indeed” (123). In the film, however, he says “Oh, Ruth, is very . . . well . . .” and pauses, as if he were about to say something like “she is well . . .well . . . she’s not terribly ugly” or something to that effect and instead has stopped to think. After the pause, he then returns to the line as if he has just found a way to save himself from this awkward situation and says “very well indeed” returning to the original meaning of the play text. In the first part of the sentence, “well” is a filler word while he tries to think of what to say. In the latter part of the sentence he means “well” as in “good.”

Sometimes this additional comic material is improvised by the actors depending on the nature of the audience and the prevailing mood. This dynamic give and take with the audience is one of the reasons that theatrical comedy can be so effective and exhilarating. Donahue refers to how the timing and portrayal of the actor can create this comic effect. “Comic actors pay particular attention to the timing of their delivery so as to ‘milk’ the audience. This is especially true at those moments when they address the audience directly and the proper intonation, gesture, or pregnant pause can incite hilarity” (Donahue 105). The audience becomes part of creating the experience and the energy and positive reaction of the crowd can create a significant momentum and set the right mood for an enjoyable comical experience.

**Working Against the Text**

The director can also work against the text to create comic irony. This frequently takes place when social mores at the time of the original play have become outdated or if the play is culturally specific to a culture other than that of the viewing audience. In modern productions of *Pirates*, this often involves making fun of the restrictive sexual
mores and outfits of the Victorian period. Working against the text frequently occurs by making fun of a subject that the original play takes seriously. *Pirates*, admittedly, seems to have relatively little room to work against the text because Gilbert was someone who made fun of the mores of his time in a relatively progressive manner and takes relatively little seriously in the first place. Working against the text for comic purposes is more common in serious sections of plays. Although *Pirates* has some serious sections, Gilbert and Sullivan themselves sometimes play against the serious tone of the scenes. “Sighing Softly to the River” is for all intents and purposes a serious song, however, the pirates, who are supposedly in hiding, sing backup to the General in his saccharine song. This is a parody of the abduction scene in *Il Trovatore* (Jacobs 135) and for those with the cultural competence to recognize that allusion, the comedy becomes increasingly significant. It is also situationally ironic because the pirates have just finished loudly singing outside the General’s house and the General comes out to see what the noise is and finds that “all is still” and concludes that the raucous noise “must have been/ The sighing of the breeze” (151). This song would be little more than a banal ode on the beauty of nature, if it were not for the comic situation that Gilbert creates as backdrop to the scene, and that Sullivan counterpoints with his serious music. “This whole number is absolutely straight; it is in no sense ‘funny’ music. Its comic point is one of pure irony, and doubly sophisticated at that” (Jacobs 135). This is an example of comedy that was written into the text, but also illustrates how a scene could play against the text of a serious scene. One scene that actually does this is found in the 1980 film of the stage production of *Pirates* directed by Wilford Leach and Joshua White. This production includes most of the same cast that
appears in the 1983 film. Ruth and the Pirate King appear to Frederic and he feels he must slay them since he has sworn to eradicate the pirates. He sings: “I do not think I ought to listen to you./ Yet mercy should alloy our stern resentment,/ And so I will be merciful—say on!” (142). In the original text this is played straight. In the 1980 stage version, Frederic changes his mind not out of any noble or forgiving sentiment, but because Ruth and the Pirate king have guns to his head. In this case, a scene that is ostensibly serious takes on a comic tone because the directors are working against the text.

Incongruity of Situation

Somewhere between linguistic humor and narrative humor, we have a category that does not comfortably belong to either, which we will term as incongruity of situation or situational comedy. The line between these and the others is sometimes thin and it is important to not put too much emphasis on the category as a defining term, but rather should be a term of convenience for talking about the phenomenon. One of these situations that the pirates have put themselves in, is their weakness for orphans. The pirates who are all orphans themselves, will not harm anyone else who is an orphan. This merciful attitude has begun to cause them some problems. As Frederic reports: “Every one we capture says he’s an orphan. The last three ships we took proved to be manned entirely by orphans, and so we had to let them go. One would think that Great Britain’s mercantile navy was recruited solely from her orphan asylums—which we know is not the case” (123). This creates a comic incongruity. A group of murderous pirates shows so much mercy that it actually destroys their livelihood. This is incongruous in that they hold dear this “one soft spot/ In their natures” (145) that is not conventionally related to the
lifestyle of piracy and is in fact opposed to it. Likewise, Frederic accuses them of being too tender-hearted. They never attack a weaker party than themselves, presumably out of a sense of fairness, and not surprisingly are defeated whenever they attack a stronger party. The Pirate King’s response, “There is some truth in that,” (123) is another excellent example of comic understatement. In addition to being tenderhearted, the pirates have a fairly strict code of moral responsibility. The Pirate King encourages Frederic in his proposed project of slaying all the pirates because he believes that Frederic should “Always act in accordance with the dictates of your conscience, my boy, and chance the consequences” (123).

Another situation in the play where Gilbert and Sullivan create an incongruity between that which is expected and the actual occurrence is found in the song “With Cat-Like Tread.” Here we have an interesting case of the music of the scene working against the text complicating the number of ways that semiotic systems can interfere with each other. The lyrics of the song talk about how quietly the pirates are sneaking up on General Stanley’s house, and the necessity for silence. The musical score, however, is one of the loudest in the operetta and is sung by the full male pirate chorus in booming tones. They do vary their dynamics at times attempting to be quiet, but invariably go back into the rousing, infectious, and definitely not quiet chorus. Instead of cat-like tread, they dance around heavily stomping their booted feet, which is accentuated by the booming of the drums and the brass. In this song, Gilbert and Sullivan are deliberately contrasting two opposing tones in two different media. Because the two semiotic systems are not synergistic, but rather oppositional, it creates a comedic incongruity.
Another comedic situation is created by the police. This group is portrayed as comical right from the start in terms of their characteristics, dialogue, and dramatic roles. Indeed, these police were forerunners of other comedic authority figures, specifically The Keystone Cops. The police represent society’s rules and strictures. The fact that they are ridiculed and satirized indicates the subversive nature of comedy and “the comic effect of the triumph over officialdom” (Blistein 14). Police are generally considered to be brave because they uphold the law in the face of the forces of lawlessness. These specific police, however, are complete cowards. They do not want the glory and honor of serving (particularly not the honor of dying a hero), but would rather lead peaceful pirate-free lives. Whenever the pirates are around, the police immediately disappear out of fear, until their eventual confrontation with the pirates at the end of the operetta. They sing about their fear of conflict and death and their self-deprecating fear of conflict provides a humorous incongruity with the established convention of the brave police protectors. When Frederic and General Stanley send them after the pirates, they keep singing instead of beginning their task. They finally say that they will go, but they do not actually go. This goes on for a while with the police saying they are going, but actually remaining in place, creating an incongruity between what they say and what they do. Later, when they sing “When a Felon’s not Engaged in his Employment,” they explain that the reason they are distressed by the prospect of facing the pirates has nothing to do with fear, but rather is for the sadness of depriving others of their liberty (148). They create a very imaginative scenario that when felons are not busy being felons, they enjoy the simple pleasures of life like basking in the sun, and listening to the gurgling brook (149). This, they claim, is the
reason that a policeman’s life is unhappy. Not because it is dangerous or unrewarding, but because they feel bad that they are the cause of others’ suffering. A noble intention, to be sure, but inappropriate for the context and the role of police in the world, and one that is in contrast to the obvious fears that they have of violent conflict with the pirates. Here again, Gilbert is playing with and overturning our preconceptions and creating ironic and incongruous commentary on a serious subject.

One of the central incongruous situations that creates comedy in **Pirates** is one that has a significant role in the narrative of the operetta. This is the paradox surrounding Frederic’s date of birth. Birthdays are relatively simple concepts, based on the idea of a recurring calendar, each person has a fixed birthday once a year and will be one year older on the next birthday. The two are semiotically connected. Frederic, however, is the victim of the one exception to this rule having been born in leap year on the 29th of February. Because of the disconnect between the calendar year and the astronomical year, it is necessary every four years to add an extra day to maintain the relationship between these two measuring systems. Thus this day comes about only once every four years. It is obvious that this provides a logical problem in determining age. Merrell argues, “Hence, a given system, relatively simple or relatively complex, can be conceived/perceived as a set of orderly, balanced, and symmetrical signs. From a metaperspective, however, apparent contradictions can arise in the system by the construction of new categories and modes of conception/perception” (37). This is precisely what creates the incongruity in this situation. There are two ways of conceiving of age. One is by the number of years a person has been alive, the other is by the number of times a person has a birthday.
Ordinarily, the two are connected and so are perceived together. In Frederic’s case, they are not connected. The first way of counting age puts him at twenty-one; the other way has him at only five-and-a-quarter. This becomes a complicated situation because of the wording of the contract of Frederic’s indenture to the Pirate King. Frederic is indentured not until he reaches his “twenty-first year,” but is in the Pirate King’s words “Until you reach your twenty-first birthday” (144). Because of this accident in nomenclature, Frederic once again feels that he is duty bound to serve the Pirate King. (The theme of duty is one that we will look at from a narrative perspective a little later in the chapter.) Indeed, while this is a fairly simple paradox, a logical joke that the pirates, Frederic, and the audience initially laugh at, it is a good example of a joke that expands past the situational into the narrative realm. Norrick argues that a small joke or idea can turn into a running joke, and even grow to inform the entire work (120), which is precisely what happens with the paradox of Frederic’s age.

Musical Comedy

Before moving into narrative, we will take a brief digression to elaborate a little on how music is used comically in Pirates. As was discussed in the introduction, a comprehensive approach to the semiotics of musical comedy is beyond the scope of this project. There are some facile comparisons to the existing semiotic systems, however, that we have discussed. One is the use of overstatement, or in this case the musical reinforcement of an idea. Jacobs states that when the pirates are described as noblemen who have gone wrong, “Sullivan found the opportunity for one of his sly musical jokes. The words ‘Who have gone wrong’ are set with clumsy, ‘wrong’ emphasis in rhythm and
harmony” (134). Another example of musical comedy is created by taking a musical cue from its original context and creating a new one for it. For example, when the Major-General introduces himself to the pirates, he sings similar lyrics and the same tune as the chorus from “Oh, Better Far to Live and Die,” the Pirate King’s introductory song. This becomes comical because the music that was semiotically connected to the Pirate King has now been incongruously and gratuitously assigned to his nominal adversary, the Major-General. Mabel’s over the top melisma in songs such as “Poor Wandering One” also creates comedy through its purposeful musical excess. Parody also plays a musical role in creating comedy. Jacobs suggests that the “Hail Poetry!” song is a musical parody, even a burlesque of “an operatic prayer scene, such as was liable to intrude with breathtaking irrelevance into a serious operatic plot” (135). Sullivan also creates comedy by the use of contrasting elements or incongruous juxtapositions. In “How Beautifully Blue the Sky,” Mabel and Frederic pledge their love for each other. Mabel’s sisters, who are obliged to protect propriety and not leave her alone with a man, but wish to give the young lovers some space, decide to talk about the weather. The girls’ fast-paced singing about the weather is in 2/4 tempo while Frederic and Mabel’s love ballad is in a slower 3/4 tempo, the contrast between which is a Sullivan trademark (Jacobs 134-5). The contrast in the speeds and tones of the two competing songs provides a comical incongruity when the two cannot be logically or thematically resolved. These brief examples hint at the complexity and the variety of ways that music is used to create or augment the comical nature of the operetta.
Narrative Structure

Roland Barthes is an important figure in semiotics who created a large body of work that addressed a variety of areas of semiotics. What concerns us most in this section is Barthes’ semiotic approach to narrative. Barthes was heavily influenced by Hjelmslev and adopted his concepts of denotation and connotation (Krampen 80), which, as discussed in chapter two, can create comic incongruity when they come into conflict with each other. Silverman, whose writings on Barthes are particular helpful in analyzing his vast body of work, describes the codes or levels of connotation in Barthes writings:

He refers to these five levels of connotation as the semic, the hermeneutic, the proairetic, the symbolic, and the cultural. The semic code functions to define persons and places, while the hermeneutic code is entrusted with the responsibility of articulating and resolving enigmas. The proairetic code establishes fixed sequences of actions, and the symbolic code unresolvable oppositions. The cultural codes, which are extremely numerous and heterogeneous, to a very large degree subsume all the other categories.

(Silverman 241)

While a detailed summarization of Barthes’ development of these levels of connotation is unnecessary here, it is important to remember that each of these levels carries its own set of related meanings any of which can be undermined at a semiotic level to create comic effects. These elements are also an important part of conveying the meaning in a narrative structure.

For Barthes, it is not necessary, perhaps even counterproductive, to attempt to find
the meaning or even a meaning of a text, but he is concerned with exploring the plurality of the text and the process of signification (Semiotic 262). His approach is structural in nature. He is interested in form over content in his analysis, and he develops his system in the context of the linguistic tradition of semiotics, or originally semiology, started by Saussure that had and continues to have such a large influence on European semiotics. Barthes himself states, “In the present state of research, it seems reasonable to take linguistics itself as a founding model for the structural analysis of narrative” (Semiotic 98). This brings up an interesting distinction. For Barthes, linguistics would belong to a first order or denotative signifying system, while literature, and in our case the dramatic text, is a connotative or second order signifying system because it is based upon the first order linguistic system (Silverman 26). The reason that Barthes makes this distinction is because of the limits of linguistic systems in their ability to signify and create meaning. He states:

Hence linguistics cannot take an object superior to the sentence, because, beyond the sentence, there is never anything but more sentences: having described the flower, the botanist cannot be concerned with describing the bouquet. And yet, it is obvious that discourse itself (as a group of sentences) is organized and that by this organization it appears as the message of another language, superior to the language of the linguists [. . .]. (Barthes, Semiotic 98)

This language superior to the sentence is narrative.

Because Barthes’ narrative model is based on a linguistic model, he compares narrative structure to the structure of a sentence. Barthes goes so far as to call discourse
“one huge ‘sentence’” (Semiotic 99) with some obvious provisions in that analogy. This way of looking at narrative as a single sentence has obvious parallels in Greimas’ isotopies. Barthes elaborates this comparison between narrative and a sentence: “we in effect recognize in narrative, enlarged and transformed in proportion, the main categories of the verb: tenses, aspects, modes, persons; further, the ‘subjects’ themselves set in opposition to the verbal predicates do not fail to submit to the sentence model” (Semiotic 100).

In a narrative, as in a sentence, each of the pieces is important. Barthes suggests that even though a textual element may not be central to the structure of a narrative, it is nonetheless connected and ultimately important in the structure (Semiotic 104). Barthes does break down some of these individual units of the narrative into what he calls functions and indices. A function is an element that is important for the narrative and functions syntagmatically with other narrative elements. Indices, on the other hand, have little narrative function, but serve to create an atmosphere or identify time and place, etc. (Nöth 371). These pieces of narrative, which are not necessarily sentences in themselves, form the structure as well as the tone of the narrative. It is important to recognize that Barthes admitted that “narrative units will be substantially independent of the linguistic units: they may of course coincide, but occasionally, not systematically” (Semiotic 105). Barthes goes on to describe how sometimes the functions are represented by units superior to the sentence, such as groups of sentences and by units inferior to it such as a word or even elements within the word (Semiotic 105-6). One example from Pirates is the use of the word “duty.” This has a highly charged meaning for Frederic right from the
beginning. It symbolizes the way that he orders his world and how he makes his life decisions. Because the narrative makes this clear from the beginning, and builds on it throughout, this single word has a tremendous effect when it is used later in the narrative. When Ruth and the Pirate King point out to Frederic that he was indentured until his twenty-first birthday, he asks them not to hold him to the letter of the contract. The Pirate King says that he is merely pointing out the fact to Frederic and leaving the rest to his sense of “duty” (144). It is the use of this word, “duty,” that ultimately causes Frederic to leave his newfound love, renounce his new life, and return to his service as a pirate. This one word not only has a significant role in the structure and direction of the plot, but carries with it a large connotated body of information regarding the Victorian view of duty, and specifically Frederic’s reliance on it.

**Comedy and Narrative**

Now that we have examined some of the characteristics of narrative, we can begin to explore how comedy uses this structure and undermines narrative codes for comedic purposes. Barthes, in describing the importance of not falling into the trap of performing an easy analysis on a text, states, “Confronting a statement, a sentence-fragment, we must always think of what would happen if the feature were not noted or if it were different. The good analyst of narrative must have a sort of imagination of the counter-text, an imagination of the aberration of the text, of what is narratively scandalous” (Semiotic 227). This could very well be the description of the work of a parodist or any good comedian. A parodist is looking for alternate meanings of the text that run counter to its original intentions or subvert its tone, style, or intent.
Comic readings of texts are possible to a large extent because every text is inherently polysemous. Corti argues that “Every text can support an incalculable number of decodifications or destructuralizations; in effect, every text is many texts in that the very nature of its polysemic complexity prevents identically repetitive readings even in the same cultural context” (qtd. in Nöth 352). Bonafin in his article on parodies likewise states: “Therefore the artistic text, by reason of its internal semiotic heterogeneity, is an excellent example of a device that is able to produce new meanings at every new reading. Artistic polysemey [. . .] is realized every time the text is put into a chain of changes of discourse” (18). These multiple readings allow for multiple interpretations, some working with various aspects of the text, some working against or subverting the text. Nöth suggests that polysemic literary theories are precursors of literary deconstruction (352).

Comedy, as we have seen, often has a destructive element, picking apart the constructs of language, society, and culture. Manetti suggests in his article on clown performances that sometimes the narrative creates comedy not from just a reversal of, but the actual disintegration of the entire plot (“Clownesche” 246). Despite the destructive tendencies of comedy, however, Palmer argues that many comedies still use the same narrative structure of serious narratives (113). This is especially true in parody and satire, which take existing codes and narratives and subvert them. Brilli calls this a double register of the narration and his arguments suggest that there is a dichotomy between narration (or the straight reading of a text) and digression (or a satirical or parodic reading of the text) (13). Brilli later describes this duality of the text as a cohabitation of two voices at the narrative level (22).
It is sometimes semantically difficult to distinguish between these narrative voices. Palmer argues that formalized distinctions between comic and tragic irony are difficult to make and that this must be decided by the connotations and a conglomeration of textual cues (118). These cues come not only from the text, but also from the general sign competence of the individual who is reading the text. This sign competence is necessary because of the often very complex and multi-layered way in which incongruity and semiotic systems interact.

So it is that comic narrative is semiotically ambiguous. On the one hand, we can see that one dimension of it is constituted by the semiotic structure of the joke: incongruity, or simultaneous plausibility and implausibility. On the other hand, other semiotic structures are also intrinsic. First, the narrative framework which in the instances quoted is essentially the narrative form of realism. Second, the characters, sites of emotional investment for the audience, clustering around a name, and revealed in a sequence of actions. Third, the sequence of actions with their own schemata of intelligibility. In any extended comic narrative, the jokes interact with these other semiotic mechanisms in a vast array of possible ways. (Palmer 117)

As we finish our examination of Pirates, we will see how certain incongruous elements interact with the narrative structure and various semiotic systems to create a comic narrative.
The Pirates of Penzance as a Comic Narrative

As we look at the narrative construction of Pirates it is important to remember that it is working within a certain set of predefined codes defined partially by its time period, but largely by its nature as an operetta. An operetta is generically a lighthearted, musical comedy and as such, it embodies a shared set of expectations between creators and audience that constrains the signs of the narrative (Barthes, Semiotic 126). Scenes of extreme violence, even dark comedy would be inappropriate for the context and the established codes of the system. On the contrary, it is expected that the tone of the operetta be comic in nature. Thus, it predisposes the audience to treat the contents in a comical or lighthearted manner. Even pointed satire is treated with some indulgence as if with an inappropriate comment made by a child. This allows the operetta to have a large degree of freedom in making comments and criticisms, because they will not be taken seriously as was the case with Sir Wolseley, the basis of the character of the Major-General.

One of the topics on which the narrative structure is based is the theme of duty, mentioned earlier. Throughout the operetta, Gilbert satirizes the constrictiveness and duty-bound mind-set of the Victorian society. “To most Victorians, the choice between ‘worldly interest’ and ‘sense of duty’ was the central dilemma of life” (Hayter 104). Indeed, the subtitle of the operetta is “The Slave of Duty.” Frederic is the epitome of one slavishly bound by duty. He states that “duty is before all–at any price I will do my duty” (144). His duty continues to control him throughout the play and causes him to change his affiliation many times. When he is indentured to the pirates, he follows them
whole-heartedly, but once out of his indentures his conscious will not allow him to just leave. “Oh! pity me, my beloved friends, for such is my sense of duty that, once out of my indentures, I shall feel myself bound to devote myself heart and soul to your extermination!” (122). The Pirate King replies, showing a similarly incongruous devotion to duty: “Well, Frederic, if you conscientiously feel that it is your duty to destroy us, we cannot blame you for acting on that conviction. Always act in accordance with the dictates of your conscience, my boy, and chance the consequences” (123). Although Frederic then devotes himself to attacking and destroying the pirates that he had previously held so dear, he suddenly changes his allegiance again once he has been confronted with the knowledge that he is still indentured to the Pirate King until his twenty first birthday.

A sense of duty pervades everything in Frederic’s life. Instead of succumbing to temptations of voyeuristic opportunity, he tells the General’s daughters that he felt it was his duty to reveal himself to them when they were about to take off their shoes and stockings (128). He also tries to persuade the General’s daughters to marry him, based on a plea to their sense of duty of rescuing him from his unfortunate position (128). Mabel agrees to marry Frederic out of a sense of duty and shames her sisters for neglecting his needs. They do call into question her sincerity, and indeed the sincerity of the Victorian sense of duty, when they say “The question is, had he not been/ A thing of beauty,/ Would she be swayed by quite as keen/ A sense of duty?” (129). General Stanley feels remorse at lying to the pirates to escape their clutches and feels a duty to confess to them, and professes that he would, if the consequences would not be so disastrous for himself. As is
obvious from the General’s insincere sense of duty and Mabel’s questionable one, Gilbert is examining the Victorian sense of duty with a satiric eye. Frederic’s sense of duty that causes him to flip flop back and forth and constantly neglect, and indeed fight against, his previous sense of duty also showcases the absurdity of structuring one’s life in this way. The final defeat of the pirates is also brought about by an appeal to a sense of duty. Despite having the upper hand over the police, the pirates end up surrendering to them when they charge the pirates to yield in Queen Victoria’s name. The pirates’ response clearly shows the incongruity of the absurd lengths to which their duty will take characters in this world. “We yield at once, with humbled mien,/ Because with all our faults, we love our Queen” (154). A simple appeal to the Englishman’s first duty to his sovereign is all it takes to bring the marauding band to its knees. The situation is ludicrous; it juxtaposes the complex set of codes surrounding bloodthirsty pirates, and the complex set of codes of a Victorian sense of moral and legal duty, and that incongruity is funny.

Structurally, the narrative of *Pirates* is moved forward by the consequences of characters, especially Frederic, doing their duty. In Barthes’ terminology, the concept of duty and each individual enaction of it serves as a cardinal function that defines and develops the narrative. The way the structural use of duty functions at a semiotic level to create a comic narrative, is through the constant use of reversals. These reversals in Frederic’s goals to support the pirates, to destroy them, and then to support them again are so incongruous when examined in the context of the entire narrative that they becomes humorous. While thrillers and action stories also have reversals of this magnitude, the narrative in *Pirates* is already placed in the comic context of an operetta. The tone and
connotations of Gilbert’s view of duty, clearly set up a comically ironic view of these actions as so simplemindedly naive and free from malice that they are not dangerous and thus pose no personal or emotional risk for the audience. Therefore, the conditions are right for a comic reading of the incongruities presented and we can laugh at Frederic and his misguided sense of duty.

There is one more twist or reversal in the narrative structure revolving around the cardinal function of duty. This is the reversal at the end of the play. The pirates have been captured and are about to be led away to prison when Ruth reveals one more startling revelation. She proclaims that they are not, in fact, commoners, but are “noblemen who have gone wrong!” (154). The General is immediately moved by this revelation, feeling duty and love for his noble “House of Peers” (154). He then ascribes their pirating ways to a youthful fling and enjoins them to “Resume your ranks and legislative duties,/ And take my daughters, all of whom are beauties” (154). New duties are placed on the former pirates, ones much more socially acceptable. They are to resume legislative duties and assume the responsibilities of family life. This type of ending is typical in comic structure (particularly comedies coming out of the tradition of Greek New Comedy). If this were a tragedy, the consequences of the pirates’ actions would be death or imprisonment, but because it is a comedy, it has a surprise and happy ending. “The tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated” (Frye 165). Indeed the whole comic turn resolving the conflict in the operetta fits neatly into this ancient comic structure. “The comic ending is generally manipulated by a twist in the plot. In Roman
comedy the heroine, who is usually a slave or courtesan, turns out to be the daughter of somebody respectable, so that the hero can marry her without loss of face” (Frye 170). While the Major-General can certainly object to pirates as sons in law, he cannot object to noblemen.

Salvatore Attardo in, Linguistic Theories of Humor, briefly argues that although not all forms of humor are narrative in nature, jokes are, in fact, narrative (92). Kolek describes these narrative qualities of jokes: “[T]he joke may be defined as a form whose distinct aesthetic effects depend on a temporary shift of concentration from the full (connotative) significance of the message to the process of resolving a bisociation (incongruity) from an information flow subjected to a combination of such interrelated manipulation techniques as data selection, ordering, and selective brevity” (162). The joke therefore creates its effect from conflicts or incongruities that are created through narrative techniques such as how and how much information is presented before the punch-line (the comical resolution of the joke) is reached. It is at this point that the person hearing or reading the joke finally discovers how all of these pieces of information in the joke are related and experiences the comic effect created by saving the key information for the resolution of the incongruity until the end. Often the joke ends with a laugh and a release of the tension built through incongruities built into the structure of the joke.

Returning briefly to the traditional comic narrative, we can see how Pirates fits nicely into this comic framework. Northrop Frye describes the process and typical content of the comic narrative.
What normally happens is that a young man wants a young woman, that his
desire is resisted by some opposition, usually paternal, and that near the
end of the play some twist in the plot enables the hero to have his will. In
this simple pattern there are several complex elements. In the first place,
the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society
to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in
charge of the play’s society, and the audience recognizes that they are
usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and
heroina together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero, and
the moment when this crystallization occurs is the point of resolution in the
action, the comic discovery, anagnorisis or cognitio. (163)
A series of oppositions keeps the two lovers apart through a careful withholding of
information, such as the nobility of the hero’s birth. Tension is created that can only be
resolved at the end when all is revealed and the entire structure of the plot and story are
revealed. The audience can then see how all the elements of the plot are related. After
this happens, Frye suggests that there is a release of tension and an act of communion and
reconciliation in the characters and, in the case of dramatic productions, with the audience
(164). If we again return to Barthes’ conception of narrative as an extended sentence, the
import of these comparisons becomes obvious. I suggest that in structural semiotic terms,
a comedy is one big joke.

During the course of this chapter we have explored Gilbert and Sullivan’s The
Pirates of Penzance as a case study for linguistic and narrative humor. We examined how
comedy is created in the linguistic text, in theatrical presentations, and in the literary narrative structure of the operetta as a whole. In each case, we have suggested that comedy takes conventional semiotic meanings and changes or subverts their standard meanings. The incongruities of such undermining of language and narrative become obvious when the signs no longer represent what they are supposed to and, at some level, we find this frustration of our expectations humorous. Although any number of comedic works could have been used for this analysis, *The Pirates of Penzance* has a variety of simple and complex types of comedy that range across a variety of linguistic categories. It is also a theatrical construct and has many layers of semiotic meaning that can be manipulated and analyzed for comedic purposes. The purpose of this dissertation is to showcase the capability and value of a semiotic approach to comedy and for that purpose, *The Pirates of Penzance* becomes the very model of a semiotical analysis.
“I don’t know what humor is. That would be something, wouldn’t it? To understand what humor is and to be able to produce it at will.”

-Eliott Erwitt (Personal 7)

Chapter 4: - How Many Surrealists Does it Take to Screw in a Lightbulb? - Visual Humor in the Visual Arts

In this chapter, we will explore how to apply a semiotics of comedy to the visual arts. We will first examine the connections between the creation of visual and verbal meaning as a semiotic function, and then explore how meaning is codified in the visual arts in semiotic terms. We will also explore how sign competency continues to be important in decoding visual information and the importance of incongruity in visual comedy.

Following our discussion of comedy as a visual construction, we will examine case studies of works by visual artists Rene Magritte, Marcel Duchamp, and by photographers Man Ray and Eliot Erwitt.

While a fairly large body of work exists on the topic of visual semiotics, the area of study has long been defined in primarily linguistic terms. Sonesson states that “we have hardly begun to consider seriously the material, and therefore perceptual, nature of pictorial meaning, let alone the perceptual organization specifically characterizing the pictorial expression plane” (67). Because a visual medium is qualitatively different than a verbal one, it is important to separate the two. Even though a homologous linguistic structure as applied to visual arts has been useful (as will be evident when we apply it to comedy), it does limit the ways in which this profoundly different medium can be thought of in semiotic terms. We will begin by exploring some of the linguistic approaches to
describing the visual arts and then examine visual codification in its own right. Here again, we are not seeking a full description of semiotic approaches to the visual arts (a book length topic in itself), but are interested in providing sufficient background to effectively demonstrate, in semiotic terms, how comedy functions on a visual level.

Bettetini and Giaccardi describe some of the basic questions that play an important role in studying visual semiotics as follows: “(1) is the possibility of a semiotic approach to painting dependent on a sort of ‘equivalence’ between painting and the linguistic system? and (2) if not, is it possible to speak about enunciation (a concept which originated in linguistics) in painting, and to define the phenomenon according to the specific characteristics of this form of expression?” (266). The first question addresses whether our way of constructing and decoding visual information is equivalent to the way we construct and decode a language. This has been a problematic issue in visual semiotics with scholars arguing both for and against the idea. One of the most useful ideas in this area is the argument that individual elements of a visual artwork can function to create meaning without necessarily carrying meaning in themselves, as a word does. This is the idea that Nöth describes as “a system of elements without meaning but with the function to differentiate meaningful visual elements” (451). Langer goes on to describe how individual elements can be used to create meaning on a visual level. “Visual forms–lines, colors, proportions, etc.–are just as capable of articulation, i.e. of complex combination, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language” (178). A language creates meaning diachronically. In other words, the import of a sentence, a paragraph, or a narrative is unfolded over time.
In diametric contrast, the meaning of a picture, at least the conglomeration of its visual meaning, is observed synchronically, at one given moment. Obviously, our minds process this information over time, and continue to pick out details and make connections both within and exterior to the visual work, but the basic act of apprehension occurs at one time. This illustrates one of the major differences between a linguistic and verbal semiotic system.

A picture does not have a syntax as such, but it does have a multiplicity of elements that contribute to its overall meaning. Langer sums up this phenomenon, commenting on the comparison of linguistic and verbal elements and, at the same time, explaining in clear terms how meaning can be created in a visual image.

Like language, it is composed of elements that represent various respective constituents in the object; but these elements are not units with independent meanings. The areas of light and shade that constitute a portrait, a photograph for instance, have no significance by themselves. In isolation we would consider them simply blotches. Yet they are faithful representatives of visual elements composing the visual object. [. . .] The ‘elements’ that the camera represents are not the ‘elements’ that language represents. They are a thousand times more numerous. For this reason the correspondence between a word-picture and a visible object can never be as close as that between the object and its photograph. [. . .] Clearly, a symbolism with so many elements, such myriad relationships, cannot be broken up into basic units. It is impossible to find the smallest independent
symbol, and recognize its identity when the same unit is met in other contexts. Photography, therefore, has no vocabulary. The same is obviously true of painting, drawing, etc. There is, of course, a technique of picturing objects, but the law governing this technique cannot properly be called a ‘syntax,’ since there are no items that might be called, metaphorically, the ‘words’ of portraiture. Since we have no words, there can be no dictionary of meanings for lines, shadings, or other elements of pictorial technique. [...] Non-discursive symbols cannot be defined in terms of others, as discursive symbols can. (180)

Thus, even though many comparisons can be made between the linguistic and verbal creation of meaning, the two remain distinct semiotic systems with their own set of sometimes overlapping boundaries. Without going into any further detail on this argument, we will adopt the stance that painting is not a language, as such, but does display certain semantic or formal characteristics that can create meaning (but not necessarily a fixed meaning) across a body of visual works.

Another problem that has arisen in the literature of verbal semiotics is the problem of discussing a non-linguistic semiotic system in anything but linguistic terms (Nöth 450). Even by employing the term “discuss” I am accepting the assumption that an analysis of visual semiotics necessitates linguistic terminology. Despite this linguistic filter that structures our way of understanding visual material, it is evident that we can understand and extract meaning from images without first translating them into a linguistic system. “Given all at once to the intelligent eye, an incredible wealth and detail of information is
conveyed by the portrait, where we do not have to stop to construe verbal meanings” (Langer 180). We find it difficult, however, to communicate about images in something other than linguistic terms. Nöth suggests, “Since pictures have no visual metalanguage of their own, it is true that language is always necessary as an instrument of pictorial analysis” (450). Even though we can understand the meanings of pictorial representations at a purely visual level, we have to resort to language to talk about them. This is potentially a problem for us as we try to explore the specific humor creating mechanisms of particular artworks. The question for us is whether the appreciation of the comedy in a visual artwork is an instantaneous reaction to the visual elements or if it is part of the process of disambiguation occurring on a linguistic level that shapes the appreciation of the comedy. This question is tied with the larger question of the visual creation of meaning, an issue which has not yet been satisfactorily answered. I believe that a certain amount of our primary response to visual humor does occur as a function of the visual process of disambiguation. Our appreciation for the nuances of what is comic about the picture, however, can be further enhanced through linguistic and logical examinations of the work and even through the interplay of word and image. Since all of our descriptions here will be, of necessity, linguistic, perhaps the issue is moot. In this process, however, we will try to avoid the trap that Veltruský describes as “a tendency to approach the meaning of the picture as a matter of what the picture ‘represents’ and, on the other hand, to limit the analysis to those pictorial meanings that can be translated into words–broadly speaking, to the thematic meanings” (252). Even though connotation and encyclopedic information play an important role in determining meaning as we discussed in chapter two,
we are here attempting to focus primarily on the formal and semiotic elements that create humor in a visual image.

One other important connection between visual and verbal semiotic systems is the idea of titles or descriptions of pictures. Barthes believes that “the structure of the photograph is not an isolated structure; it is in communication with at least one other structure, namely the text–title, caption or article–accompanying every press photograph. The totality of the information is thus carried by two different structures (one of which is linguistic). These two structures are cooperative but, since their units are heterogeneous, necessarily remain separate from one another” (Image 16). Although Barthes is here referring to a specific type of visual art (a photograph) in a specific medium (a news publication), he is describing an important relationship. Most visual images in our everyday experience are attached to some form of explanatory text, even if it is merely a title, date, and artist’s name. Barthes argues that the image and the text are usually in a complementary relationship (Image 41), but, as we shall examine, this relationship can be undermined and subverted for comic purposes.

**Visual Encoding**

In contrast to linguistic systems, the visual code is not based (at least not exclusively) on a pre-existing semiotic system. “The pictorial sign is characterized by the naturalness and materiality of its significant” (Veltruský 245). Much of visual representation has some correlation to an existing visually observed object. It is not an arbitrary semiotic system as is language. Imagine a language that is based primarily on onomatopoeic expressions. The level of abstraction required for verbal communication
makes such a concept impossible in practice, but this does provide an analogy to how images can be compared to the things that they represent. An image is, to a certain extent, motivated and not arbitrary. Veltruský argues that meaning is created in a visual art primarily as a function of how well it imitates its subject or, in other words, its mimetic ability. He also suggests that meaning can also be created through the use of “graphic symbols such as the point, the circle, the triangle, the mandorla, the trefoil, and their combinations, all sorts of crosses, stars, and spirals, the opposition between straight line and curve, horizontal and vertical, and so on” and that meaning can also be conveyed by the spatial location of elements in the picture field (251). The important characteristic of these graphic symbols is that they are conventional and must be learned. Certainly, things like classical perspective are, to an extent, also learned signifying systems, but these have a closer mimetic relationship to the objects that they attempt to depict. One of the other important points that Veltruský makes in his article is that symbols can convey a variety of different meanings depending on the context. As we have discussed previously, the polysemic quality of any sign allows for the potential of comic subversion.

The photograph is a special case of visual reproduction since (to use Peirce’s classification) it is a signifier that has a very close iconic relationship to its signified so that they “correspond point by point to nature” (Peirce 106). Because of this one-to-one comparison, Barthes argues that a photograph is a “message without a code” (Image 17). He argues that this differentiates a photograph from other visual arts such as painting or drawing because the act of human creation necessitates the intervention of stylistic qualities, even if that style is an attempted realism (Image 17-8). Human beings cannot
reproduce everything within their field of vision in a manual artistic medium. They pick out details and make judgments about what is most important to represent and what is unimportant, and even let stylistic considerations determine the level of detail in an artistic work (Barthes, Image 43). Barry, however, disagrees with Barthes’ assessment that photographs are uncoded signs. “A photograph of a can is not a can, and some conventional competence, however slight, is required to ‘read’ such supposedly ‘uncoded’ pictures. Thus these signs [. . .] denote things and ideas different from those things and ideas to which by our semiotic conventions they refer” (Barry 9). Barthes does admit to at least some form of codification in the photograph suggesting that meaning “is realized at the different levels of the production of the photograph (choice, technical treatment, framing, lay-out) and represents, finally, a coding of the photographic analogue” (Image 20). In essence, then, a photograph or any work of visual art has meaning that goes beyond its simple iconic representation. The formal aspects of a work can create their own meaning through repetition and variation, symmetry, progression, balance, line, shape, texture, hue etc. (Barry 16-7). These things can create objective meaning because, as Barry argues throughout his book, Art, Culture, and the Semiotics of Meaning, material and formal properties have content (95).

Connotation

Through the use of symbols or other semiotic means of representation, visual works can also connote meaning. As we discussed in chapter two, connotation is one of the main carriers of semiotic meaning. Barthes, who constantly emphasized the importance of connotation, suggests that in advertising connotation is often metonymous.
For instance, he argues that in an advertisement an orange might metonymically connote the ideas of juicy and thirst-quenching (Semiotic 186), or that a tomato can be used to connote “Italianicity” (Image 50). In addition to the individual elements within a picture, the entire grouping of elements within the image or the parataxis of elements (to use Barthes’ term) can also connote meaning. Barthes describes a particular photograph from a French magazine and its connoted meaning: “Here, for example, is a ‘composition’ of objects: a window opening on to vineyards and tiled roofs; in front of the window a photograph album, a magnifying glass, a vase of flowers. Consequently, we are in the country, south of the Loire (vines and tiles), in a bourgeois house (flowers on the table) whose owner, advanced in years (the magnifying glass), is reliving his memories (the photograph album)” (Barthes, Image 23). From this brief description, it is obvious how much information can be conveyed through the connotation of the various elements of an image individually, as well as in conjunction.

**Visual Competence**

In order to properly disambiguate a visual sign, as in any semiotic system, we must have the necessary sign competence. While there has been a large amount of debate on the subject, it seems apparent that at least some conventions of three dimensional Western art have to be learned in order to be recognizable (Hochberg 110-35). This is the most basic level of visual competence. It is the question of whether or not we can determine, at a pictorial level, what is being represented. At a more advanced level than this is a recognition that visual objects can carry symbolic meaning and having an understanding of the process of creating meaning. For instance, this ability requires that we understand the
meaning of a cross as something more than intersecting lines in a painting (Merrell 68).

Another important part of a person’s visual competency when dealing in the world of visual art, is what Barthes calls a “‘historical grammar’ of iconic connotation” (Image 22). This historical grammar comprising iconic conventions such as halos for saints, an upside down crucifix for saint peter, a crown for royalty, a dove for peace, etc. These are the cultural representations that have acquired meaning through repetition and adoption into convention. Of course there are a host of other factors that go into determining a person’s visual competence, such as knowledge of historical events, cultural traditions, visual theory, a knowledge of a particular artist’s oeuvre, and other learned information that makes up a person’s encyclopedic knowledge of the subject.

Barry’s comments on the subject of visual competency allude to the importance that this knowledge has for the creation of comedy. Of parodic quotations of past art he states that observers “require a knowledge not only of the art being quoted but of the cultural assumptions surrounding it” (117). Kierkegaard’s reference to caricature also emphasizes the importance of visual competence for the creation of comedy. “A caricature is comical, and why? Because of the contradiction between likeness and unlikeness; the caricature must resemble a human being, an actual, particular person; if it resembles no one at all, it is not comical, but is a straightforward essay in the sphere of the unmeaning fantastic” (qtd. in Morreall, Philosophy 88). Just as in verbal humor, we have to understand the standard or the convention and have an ability to make a comparison in order to realize and appreciate the incongruity.
Visual Humor

Denys Lessard, whose article in *Semiotica* is one of the most comprehensive attempts to explain the semiotics of visual comedy, sets up incongruity as the central element in creating visual humor. Relying heavily on Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Dominique Noguez, Lessard suggests that visual comedy is a playful reconciliation of irreconcilables (87). Thus he understands the creation of visual humor in terms of incongruity and resolution. Lessard is primarily interested in explaining what he calls visual puns. Borrowing again from Noguez, he relies heavily on two linguistic terms, “syllepsis” and “antanaclasis,” and applies them to the creation of visual comedy. By syllepsis, he means that in the same visual space two similar elements have two different meanings. By antanaclasis, he means one visual element that has two simultaneous meanings. It is an element that belongs to two different sets at the same time (think of Koestler and his theory of bisociation) (Lessard 83). Lessard goes on to list some types of visual situations that create comedy, including the overlap of two opposite registers (or isotopies), double identification of the same object, and visually contradictory statements (87). One of the major limitations of Lessard’s work is that he tries to tie visual humor too explicitly to verbal humor. Attardo suggests that, for Lessard, the difference between linguistic and visual humor is merely a factor of the type of sign involved, iconic as opposed to linguistic (184). Lessard is aware, however, that his classification is somewhat arbitrary and does not always mesh up neatly with linguistic terminology (86).

One thing to take into consideration when thinking about visual humor is the question of whether or not the humor is intrinsic to the visual form, in other words
whether the humor is a function of its visual representation or if it would still be funny if it
were told as a joke or explained verbally. Morreall suggests that there are types of humor
that are purely visual, although many types of verbal humor can be represented visually
(Seriously 74). Kennedy lists several types of verbal comedy that can be translated into a
visual form including irony, understatement, hyperbole, exaggeration, synecdoche, and
oxymoron (208). Dorfles explores an interesting area that relies on the transition from
linguistic to visual terms, arguing that one way of creating comedy visually is to put a
verbal metaphor in visual terms. The example he gives is a drawing of a table leg that
looks like a human leg, complete with foot and toes (Artificio 109). In this case, the
comedy relies on the incongruity created by translating a metaphoric linguistic trope into a
literal visual representation. Another interesting type of humor that crosses the boundaries
of language and visuals is described by Sebeok. This is an unusual type of hybrid joke that
is primarily verbal, but requires a visual gesture for the punch line to be effective (115-
119).

**Dada, Surrealism, and Comedy**

Dada had its inception during the first World War and was created largely as a
reaction to the tradition of Western rationalism that led up to the war. Perhaps better
defined as an anti-art movement than an art movement, it sought, in many instances, to
overturn conventional concepts of art and artistry. Surrealism was a descendent of Dada
and officially began with Andre Breton’s Manifesto of Surrealism in 1924. A minute
exploration of the differences and similarities of the two movements is beyond the scope
of this analysis. In this study, we will concentrate on the comic elements common to these
related art movements. For simplicity’s sake, we will primarily refer to Surrealism in the discussion of comedy, although the same observations on comedy can often be applied to Dada.

Surrealism as a form and as an artistic movement lends itself well to the study of comedy. Although Surrealism cannot be reduced to a purely comic phenomenon, comedy does play an important role in much of Surrealist work and functions by many similar or parallel processes. Surrealism and Dada both had many other objectives and influences, but for our purposes, we will concentrate on the comic elements in them.

Although Surrealism originated as a literary movement, it quickly turned towards the visual arts, the medium by which it is now best known. Andre Breton, the father of Surrealism, defined Surrealism as, “Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (qtd. in Montagu 11). The desire to escape the control of reason noticeably echoes Schopenhauer’s wording at the end of his description of incongruity where he states, “It must therefore be delightful for us to see this strict, untiring, and most troublesome governess, our faculty of reason, for once convicted of inadequacy” (Representation 2: 98). Thus, at a very basic level, Surrealism shares some parallel structures and intentions with comedy and incongruity. In addition, early Surrealism was heavily influenced by Freud and his work on the unconscious, a subject which Freud specifically related to the comic. Publications by the movement emphasized the bizarre or unusual and included puns, wordplay, and games
Early Surrealist poets used techniques such as disruption of meaning, unusual juxtaposition and syntactical discontinuity which was seen as a parallel to the work that Max Ernst was doing with collage in the visual arts (Montagu 14). Ernst would sometimes use incongruous juxtapositions, such as material inspired by classical paintings of the human form and scientific muscular images taken from anatomy textbooks. This juxtaposition would call into question and blur the boundaries that typically separate different forms or isotopies (Montagu 35). As we have discussed, this blurring of edges and ambiguity of definition is the same generative ground that comedy springs from. All of these things emphasized the Surrealist concept of “the marvelous” which was defined in terms of a basic incongruity. Louis Aragon defined the marvelous as “that which opposes itself” (qtd. in Montagu 43). Inherent in this idea is the concept of subversion of meaning; it even opposes itself.

In describing the ready-made, a Dadaist creation that takes existing objects and places them in artistic contexts, Manetti suggests that one of the purposes of ready-mades, as can be expanded to Dadaist and Surrealist art in general, is to create paradoxical signification (“Ready Made” 77). Thus, incongruity is a basic part of this type of art. In addition, he emphasizes how these objects, like much of comedy, rely on surprise, which ready-mades create through new and provocative combinations (“Ready Made” 66). In addition to new combinations of elements, Surrealist work often causes us to see the world and our logical construction of it in new ways. “In the work of surrealists like Dali and Magritte we find not just visual joking but a playing around with our very sense of visual reality–with the logic of two dimensions and three dimensions, for example, or our
ordinary distinctions between the solid and the fluid, the animate and the inanimate” (Morreall, Seriously 96). Surrealism required an adaptability and willingness to see the world in new ways to appreciate it. It also required a sophisticated sign competence. Violi suggests that Surrealism is a refined joke for the intellectual (“Ideologia” 128), emphasizing the idiosyncratic and intellectual sign competency that one has to have to understand some of the more obscure works that behave, more or less, like private jokes. Despite the relative lack of study that the comedic qualities of Surrealist art has received, it proves to be a rich ground for the exploration of how visual comedy can be created.

To begin our examination of visual arts, we will start with a look at a few of the works of Belgian Surrealist painter, Rene Magritte. Although works from many Surrealist artists could have been chosen for this analysis, the work of Magritte has been selected for several reasons. One is personal preference. I find his work intriguing, even those that are not particularly comic in nature. In addition, his work exemplifies many of the semiotic subversions that create comedy. While I do not want to suggest that his work can be reduced merely to comic terms (in fact much of it is not overtly funny), his paintings do provide useful case studies of ways in which incongruities can be created in a visual form. Magritte also has an interesting connection to semiotics. Magritte was very interested in language and its connection to images, and in fact published an essay on the subject entitled “Words and Images.” Words often appear in his paintings and are sometimes used for the incongruity that they create with the image. Surrealists in general and the Belgian Surrealists in particular, were interested in the work that Saussure had done in linguistics, which had been published a few years earlier, in 1915.
These theories undermined the tradition of ‘nominalism’, where a word is equivalent to the thing it describes, and suggested that language is simply another system of interpretation. Saussure’s ideas offered tremendous freedom to the Surrealists, who wished to overthrow traditional or fixed systems of understanding the world. Their task was to investigate the relationship between language and experience, and to discover new and liberating ways of communicating. (Montagu 80)

There is no evidence that Magritte had actually read Saussure, but it is clear that he came to some of the same conclusions about language. He stated, “No object is so inextricably linked to its name that one could not give it another name that would suit it better” (qtd. in Montagu 88). Magritte was aware of the conventional and arbitrary nature of language and explored that theme in his visual representations. He also exemplified the act of playing with the boundary between word and picture that Lotman argued was the “purely pictorial sphere of verbal metaphor” of the Surrealists (62). In the following analysis I am, for the most part, purposely ignoring traditional art-historical interpretations of the work in order to concentrate on the visual qualities of the images that create visual comedy.

A logical place to begin an examination of Magritte’s work is his 1929 painting The Treachery of Images (see Figure 1). This painting depicts a realistic, but simplified looking pipe on a plain background with a phrase written beneath it stating in French, “This is not a pipe.” This painting is a representation of Magritte’s ideas about the connection of words, ideas, and languages as different manifestations of the phenomenon
of thought (Montagu 84). Montagu rightfully argues that the text in the painting is accurate, that what we see is not, in fact, a pipe, but a large-scale two dimensional representation of one, and in physical and practical terms, is not a pipe (88). While much has been and can be said about what this painting suggests about the philosophical issues underlying reality and representation, the important point for our analysis is the incongruities that are here presented. The immediately obvious incongruity is the clear paradox or contradiction between the text and the image. We clearly see an iconic image that can only be meant to represent a pipe. This is directly contradicted by the statement below it indicating that what we see is not what it is. This incongruity is funny in its own right and perhaps is the most striking comic incongruity of the painting. Yet at the same time, this painting creates another incongruity on a deeper, philosophical level. As has been described above, this painting calls into question the nature of reality and its visual representation. This points out the incongruity of attempting to represent a three dimensional object in a two dimensional medium. The image is not real even though, by all appearances, it is realistic. The title of the piece, The Treachery of Images, also emphasizes the incongruity of an image that purports to be realistic but cannot ever be real. Even though the picture of the pipe is more amusing than funny, it still has the basic elements of comic incongruity. Dorfles argues that Surrealism in general, and this painting in particular, uses the same signifying mechanism as the comic (“Semiotica” 21). Why people do not typically think of Surrealist paintings as primarily comic as opposed to dreamlike or disturbing is likely largely due to the emotional and cognitive environments that they create which are not intended to be exclusively comic.
Another of Magritte’s paintings that emphasizes incongruous juxtapositions, this time in a purely visual form, is the 1935 painting, Collective Invention (see Figure 2). This painting depicts a strange creature with the upper body of a fish and the lower body of a woman. This juxtaposition of two very unlike things is in itself incongruous and can be considered comic, even though this is not a painting that necessarily makes the majority of people laugh. This is probably because of the strangeness of the image, which feels vaguely threatening, and is not conducive to a completely comfortable emotional environment. Nevertheless, it does have the basic incongruity necessary to be, at some level, comic. The incongruity, however, does not remain on the level of a mere juxtaposition of unlike things in an impossible relationship. The combination of a fish with a woman is something that does have precedent in the realm of myth and fantasy in the form of a mermaid and is part of the encyclopedic competence of the majority of viewers. The mermaid, like Magritte’s creature, is half woman, half fish. The difference is (and here Magritte is playing with the existing semiotic system), that the halves are reversed. A mermaid has a torso of a woman and the tail of a fish. In this way, Magritte contradicts an existing semiotic system. That a mermaid is a fantasy creation and not real is irrelevant; it still is a coherent and conventional semiotic entity and thus can be subverted for comic purposes. Visually, Magritte includes one more incongruity. The body of the woman is lying on its side facing the viewer; the fish, however, is lying with its ventral region on the sand with its back tilted only slightly away from the viewer. From this aspect the belly of the woman matches to the side of the fish, creating a logical incongruity of physiological construction, while at the same time demonstrating a smoothly flowing line where the fish
melds imperceptibly with the woman. As was mentioned earlier, boundaries are an important area for both Surrealism and comedy, and the ambiguous boundary between the parts of the woman and the fish and between the sea and the land where this creature rests heightens this sense of ambiguity.

Another technique that we discussed as part of a semiotic means of creating comedy is the insertion of something into a new context (Dorfles, Artificio 100-101). Magritte uses this concept frequently in his art. In The Lost Jockey (1942) (see Figure 3) we see the figure of a jockey on a horse in a strange forest of what Magritte called bilboquets. The bedpost-like structures are unusual in this context as is the curtain off to the right hand side of the painting. The bilboquets sprout tree limbs complete with leaves and are arranged as if carefully planted on a landscaped boulevard. The figures of the bilboquets look incongruous because they are obviously man made and painted white. At the same time, however, they are made of wood and were part of a tree at some point. They are semiotically connected to their new context and the new roles that they play, yet at the same time are inappropriate for them. The jockey is also taken out of his usual context of a racetrack. Instead of being part of a group of fiercely racing jockeys and horses, he rides alone in this empty landscape of straight lines that resembles nothing so little as a race track. Thus, each element in this picture is out of place and struggling to fit into its new context.

As we mentioned earlier in the chapter, images and their titles both carry meaning. Barthes argued that they work together conventionally, and that is why having a title that contradict the isotopy of the image can create an incongruity. We are accustomed to
images and titles working together. Paintings like The Castle in the Pyrenees (1959) (see Figure 4), uses this conflict between title and image for the incongruities that it can create. Here we see a large boulder floating over the sea and perched atop it is a castle. It is obvious that we are not in the Pyrenees, because the Pyrenees are a range of mountains not an ocean. This is one of the obvious incongruities (not to mention that mountains do not typically float in the air). Yet at the same time, we cannot help but wonder if this floating mountain was originally part of the Pyrenees and was ripped out of its place by some unseen power and brought to where it now floats above the sea. This raises the question of identity mentioned in chapter two. Can this rock really be considered the Pyrenees if it was once part of the chain of mountains? The Pyrenees are plurally defined, because they are made up of many mountains and occupy a fixed and given geographic space. Yet this piece of floating rock at one time did apparently belong to the chain so it remains semiotically connected with it. Here Magritte is again blurring the semiotic boundaries to create an ambiguity which enriches the comic potential of the combined image and title.

Magritte’s 1953 Golconda (see Figure 5) is an excellent example of both repetition, and of Lessard’s antanaclasis. Magritte depicts a building which occupies a little more than the bottom third of the frame and an empty dull-blue sky behind it. Filling all this space are nearly identical figures of men dressed in the same dark pants, overcoat, and bowler hat. The repetition in itself creates an incongruity, for how could so many identical figures exist? The figures are also suspended in the air filling the frame. While this conveys a feeling of the fantastic that can only be described eponymously as surreal, it
is still so strikingly bizarre that it becomes humorous. At the same time, the figures act as antanaclases in that they represent men, but also appear to be black raindrops, falling out of the sky. This is what Lessard describes as a double use of an element in the graphic code (83). Our acceptance of this interpretation is complicated, because although they appear similar to raindrops and seem to be falling from the sky, they appear and are placed in such regular patterns, that we cannot blindly accept this interpretation. The idea of men raining from the sky and the idea that men can both appear to be men and raindrops are so incongruous, that they create comedy.

We will look at one more example of Magritte’s work before moving on. In this case, his 1945 painting The Blaze (See Figure 6) again exemplifies what Lessard argues is a visual pun or antanaclasis, meaning multiple uses of the same visual form (82). In this case we see a cylindrical figure which appears at first glance to be a vase because it is topped with a bunch of pink flowers. The image however is polysemous. It can be read in multiple ways. When we examine it more closely, it appears to be made of mortared stone in the shape of a medieval tower complete with a small wooden door at the bottom and two small windows facing the viewer. This creates an initially unsolvable incongruity. Is it a vase that looks like a tower or is it a tower that is holding impossibly large flowers? The context is ambiguous and does not readily help us resolve the incongruity. The tower/vase is apparently outside sitting on the ground near a drop off. The foregrounded tower/vase has no objects near it to give us a sense of scale. The tiny size of the doors and windows on the tower/vase would indicate it is very large, if it is a tower. If it is not, they are merely decoration on a vase and could be any size. The flowers, assuming normal
proportions, indicate that the tower/vase is the normal size for a vase. The background of
the painting is visually separated from the foreground by the drop-off and shows a vast
landscape in the distance. This likewise provides no visual clues for us to disambiguate
the image. In addition, the title, The Blaze, complicates our reading of the image. It is
unclear what this refers to. It could refer to the blaze of color created by the pink flowers,
it could refer to the blaze of the orange sunset in the distance, or it could be indicating that
this is some kind of lighthouse, upon which a fire could be lit as a beacon to those around
it. Certainly it is in a high enough and clear enough position to be seen from quite some
distance. There simply does not appear to be any clearly discernible correct interpretation
of the visual material before us. Magritte himself resisted the idea of singular
interpretation. About this painting he wrote a letter criticizing a friend’s interpretation of
the meaning that reduced the image to a Freudian depiction of sex with the tower as the
phallus. Magritte was more interested in representing ordinary things in extraordinary
ways than he was in assigning (or even accepting) a fixed interpretation of his work
(Sylvester 318). Magritte thus maintains, not only an ambiguity that allows for multiple
and conflicting interpretations, but also a sense of play that encourages attempts at mental
resolution, but does not actually set down rules that insist on that resolution.

The next example comes from the Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp. The work in
question is his 1919 piece L.H.O.O.Q. (see Figure 7). This figure is a reproduction of
Leonardo da Vinci’s, Mona Lisa on which Duchamp drew a mustache and beard and
added his own title, “L.H.O.O.Q.” In his article on the ready-made, Manetti does an
excellent job describing some of the various semiotic processes that go into the creation of
comedy in this work. Manetti’s interpretation will therefore be summarized with a few additional comments to complement the insightful analysis. When Manetti originally examined the artwork in his 1976 article “Per un Semiotica del Comico,” he suggested that one of the factors that created humor in the artwork was context. He argued that when something like L.H.O.O.Q. is put into a pre-constituted context, such as high art which has predefined denotative and connotative values, the conflicting signification creates incongruity and thus comedy (142). In “Ready Made,” Manetti suggests that unlike the typical ready-made, Duchamp has chosen not an ordinary object, but one that already belongs to the aesthetic sphere. The Mona Lisa is already connected to the highest tradition of art history and it comes loaded with ethical and anthropological connotations concerning the Renaissance female, specifically connoting the ideals of nobility, sweetness, and a detachment from passion. Thus, argues Manetti, when Duchamp adds a masculine beard and a mustache to the figure it comes into direct contrast with all these connoted ideals of Renaissance femininity. In addition, the title of the painting also creates a comic incongruity. When the letters of the title are pronounced in French it sounds like an obscene anatomical and sexual reference, creating a kind of word game and contradicting the ideal of detachment from passion. Through his visual desecration of the artwork, Duchamp is attacking women, Mona Lisa herself, and the work of Leonardo da Vinci. He is also breaking the fundamental rule that one does not modify the work of a great artist (Manetti, “Ready Made” 78-9). It is clear from Manetti’s description that Duchamp creates comedy through multiple levels of semiotic transgression and incongruity. What is not clear from Manetti’s analysis, however, is the
sense of play and the naughty indulgence that this work represents. This is an act of graffiti. It is like something that a pubescent youth would do to flout authority or just because he or she thought it would be funny. Similarly, the obscene title appeals to the same level of thought and represents subversive use of taboo language. In this act of desecration, Duchamp takes pleasure in breaking the rules for the sheer pleasure of breaking them. Just like the comic this act is subversive and does not submit to the rules.

The next example provides a nice transition from the realm of painting and drawing into the photographic realm. Man Ray’s Violon d’Ingres (see Figure 8) is a Surrealist work, but it also moves us into the visual realm of the photograph. Man Ray, an American adopted by the Surrealist group in Paris, worked primarily in photography but also painted and created Dadaist sculptures (Montagu 42). Violon d’Ingres depicts the back of a nude woman wearing a turban on her head. On her back there are two superimposed f-holes of a violin which are placed so that the comparison of her figure to a violin is unmistakable. Visually, Man Ray forces us to associate two separate isotopies (violin and nude woman) in the form of one iconic representation. This is a clear example of Manetti’s principle of parallelism where two things are set up so that we can observe their comic similarities. It is also similar to Milner’s pun which brings two unrelated ideas under one concept (Milner 18). While the similarity between the woman and the violin is so surprising and incongruous it is comic, there are several further levels of comic meaning that can be decoded using a variety of contextual information or encyclopedic knowledge.

The title of the photograph refers to Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, the French painter who lived from 1780-1867. Ingres was known for his sensuous paintings of nude
women; one of his best known works is *The Turkish Bath* (1862) (see Figure 9). In this painting, the central figure is a nude woman with her back to the viewer (in a pose similar to Man Ray’s model), holding a stringed instrument and wearing a turban. The visual parallels are obvious.

The title of the work is also important. Literally translated, “violon d’Ingres” means “Ingres’s violin.” Manetti suggests that the painter had a passion for the violin as well as nude women (“Ready Made” 78). The title in conjunction with the visual image makes this implication clear. To add a further layer of semantic meaning, the phrase “violon d’Ingres” translates idiomatically in French as “hobby.” The violin was a hobby of Ingres’ and the connotation is also that the nude woman (Kiki de Montparnasse, Man Ray’s model and lover), as a sexual object, is also a hobby. Man Ray’s photo provides not only visual incongruity that produces a comic effect, but it is also layered with semantic, implicative, and contextual meaning, that enriches the interpretive experience in direct correlation with the increasingly specialized sign competence of the observer. Not only is the ability to visually disambiguate meaning and make comparisons important, but a full interpretation requires a considerable amount of knowledge about a relatively minor French painter, his artistic oeuvre, contextual information about his life, knowledge of Surrealism, knowledge of Man Ray’s life and his personal relationship to the model, and idiomatic French. Even though a fairly complex semiotic competence is required to appreciate the various significations of this image, it is important to remember that the comedy of the image is instantaneous. We do not need to formalize the thought that the woman’s form looks like a violin to cognitively understand and appreciate the incongruity,
but as we do begin to think about it, the myriad of other meanings can be recognized and this adds to the intellectual interest of the artwork.

**Elliott Erwitt and the Comic Photograph**

The photograph, according to Peirce’s classification, can be considered both an icon and an index. It is iconic because it closely resembles what it represents and it is indexical because it allows us to connect nature point by point to the photograph (Nöth 461). Because of this close relationship with reality, it is often seen as more authentic, or more realistic than the other visual arts. Because this aura of reality lends a certain credibility to the photograph as an authentic reproduction of reality, it is susceptible to comic undermining. Therefore, when something that appears to be impossible, shows up in a photograph, it has the potential to be more incongruous than it might be in another visual medium where certain conventional interventions by the artist are assumed.

The work of Elliott Erwitt was chosen because Erwitt has an uncanny eye for observing comic incongruity and creating it through his choice of subjects, angles, and his eye for detail. Of Erwitt and his ability to capture visual comedy Wilfrid Sheed said, “Almost anyone else with Erwitt’s eyes would be tempted to turn to satire, a supposedly stronger art. [. . .] Erwitt’s bilious, goofy world is quite as biting as satire, but there is no point to detach from it, nothing to talk about. Critics prefer satire because it keeps them in business: you can talk all day about satire. Humor criticism requires an aesthetic” (6). Indeed, most of Erwitt’s photographs do not require as extensive an encyclopedic knowledge as is required for the appreciation of satire, but rather rely on visual elements to create incongruities (largely self-contained), within the visual frame. Although, to a
certain extent, I agree with Sheed’s argument that few of Erwitt’s photographs gain anything from description (6), I believe that we can gain something from their analysis and examination of how this master of the photographic form visually creates and captures comedy. Erwitt stated that “it’s good when you can’t explain a picture, because that means it’s visual” (qtd. in Holmes 122). Despite this caveat, I will attempt to show that visual comedy can be explained in semiotic terms, and that even though the medium of those terms is linguistic, it does not detract from the comedic potential of the visual image as a visual image.

In the following pages, I will be dividing up several of Erwitt’s pictures into a variety of categories. These categories are both limited in scope and in their descriptive ability. Certainly, Erwitt uses other types of visual tropes to create comic effects and does not limit himself to purely comic forms, being also very capable of producing pathos, curiosity, and wonder in his work. These categories also are not proscriptive. Individual photographs may be equally comfortable in more than one category, but the categories are useful in that they allow us to see general trends and techniques in the creation of comic photographs.

**Visual Narrative**

The easiest place to start is with a category of Erwitt’s work that is theoretically the most complex, namely the use of multiple images to create a narrative effect. Roland Barthes states of this narrative property of multiple photographs: “Naturally, several photographs can come together to form a sequence [. . .]; the signifier of connotation is then no longer to be found at the level of any one of the fragments of the sequence but at
that—what the linguists would call the suprasegmental level—of the concatenation” (Image 24). Some of these are straightforward. For example, in the series of photographs entitled Albany, New York, 1962 (see Figure 10), one could easily describe the comedy in the situation in narrative terms. In the first image we see a group of people gathered together talking or listening to someone speak. There is a dog sitting a little off to the side apparently intent on observing the situation that has the people so involved. In the next frame, it appears as if the dog has become bored and turns away as if to leave the scene. The people are still in the same position intently observing whatever is going on in the circle. In the third frame we get the comic punch-line as it were. The dog has walked up to a post, lifted his leg and urinated on it. We see this as a commentary on the part of the dog, who thought that whatever it was that the humans were involved in was less interesting than leaving to urinate. There is also a mild sense that the urine (with all the unpleasant connotations of that waste product) is somehow a commentary on what is going on. While the picture sequence is visually funny, the story could be told anecdotally and still be considered funny. It would lose some of its impact, but the comedy lies primarily in the narrative rather than in the visuals.

The sequence Saint Tropez, 1979 (see Figure 11) is similarly narrative driven. In the first frame, we have a somberly dressed woman in a cemetery, standing at a grave site with her head bowed and arms folded as if in prayer. A dog stands a respectful distance behind her with its head slightly bowed as it looks on. In the next frame, the woman bends over to place flowers on the grave and the dog is sitting attentively behind, ears alert and posture erect. The third image again provides the comic moment. The woman is
no longer visible in the frame, but the dog has remained behind, and in direct contrast to
the serious aspect that it had maintained before and the serious nature of this moment of
reverencing the dead, the dog is rolling around on its back in the amusing way that dogs
do. There is no doubt a synergy between the humor of the narrative structure and the
humor of the image, but both could exist independently of the other. The scene could be
described verbally and still be comical, and the incongruity of the final image of a
undignified action and posture in a dignified context also creates a comic incongruity. The
real impact, of course, is in the combination of the two. Certainly the first two images
would not be comic if they were removed from the context of the narrative but in
conjunction with the other they are comic.

A related picture set is found in Cannes, 1975 (see Figure 12). This is a two
picture set in which “one frame plays straight man to the other” (Sheed 7). In the first
picture we have a rather unremarkable couple relaxing in canvas deck chairs. In the next
frame, the people are gone and a strong wind has pushed out the canvas seats so that they
are billowing like sails. Neither one of these images is comic in itself, but the juxtaposition
of the two becomes incongruous. There is an implied incongruity between heaviness and
lightness or constraint and freedom for the chairs, but there is also the latent sense of a
narrative as if perhaps the couple has been blown away by a strong wind or, even more
incongruously, ejected by the chairs themselves.

A final type of narrative I will term implied narrative. This is a situation where
there is a single image, but it implies the existence of a narrative. Teheran, Iran, 1967 (see
Figure 13) is a good example of this. Here we see a mostly empty space with a small palm
tree in the center. Standing nearby is a dog looking in the direction of the tree. Because the knowledge that dogs urinate on trees is a part of common encyclopedic knowledge, we get the feeling that this is the dog’s intention. Since the tree is so small, however, we attribute to the dog the idea that perhaps the tree is too small and he is standing there waiting for it to grow into a full sized tree. The humor is in the implied mini-narrative and the ridiculous notion that the dog would or could wait until the tree matured.

**Indexical Visual Comedy**

This next category I will call indexical visual comedy. This is comedy based on a fairly simple visual trope of pointing out or emphasizing some incongruity in visuals or behavior. *Amsterdam, Holland 1972* (see Figure 14) provides a nice example of this. In this photo we see a sign of a giant hand with an extended index finger visually pointing at a man who is picking his nose. The man is, of course, in this position by happenstance, but Erwitt has captured the perfect moment. It appears as if the hand is specifically calling attention to and pointing out this violation of socially acceptable behavior. This is incongruous because we intuitively know that the sign is permanent and was not designed or placed to point to this man who is obviously moving fairly quickly judging by his broad stride, uplifted foot, and the slight blur of his image on the photographic print. Even though we know this could not be designed to point to him, it *is* pointing to him and that incongruity becomes funny. In addition, the man’s hand that picks his nose is in the same shape as the hand that points to this behavior. This similarity also proves to be a comedic because we have the repetition of the same form for two very different purposes. One is perpetrating the infraction, while the other seems to point out the infraction.
Mount Fuji, Japan, 1977 (see Figure 15) is another example of indexical visual comedy. Here we see a majestic photo of Mt. Fuji rising in the background. In the foreground there is a street sign with an arrow that points straight up towards the top of Mt. Fuji. Street signs are a conventional semiotic system for directing traffic. By convention, the arrow that points straight up traditionally means straight ahead (as opposed to left or right). Erwitt subverts this conventional meaning to emphasize the indexical quality of the arrow, which does actually point up. In addition, understatement provides some of the visual comedy of this picture. The street sign, while foregrounded in the picture and visually quite large, is so modest compared to the immensity of Japan’s largest and most famous mountain, that it becomes ridiculous.

The third example in this category is New Orleans, U.S.A. 1970 (see Figure 16). In this picture we see a long haired man running onto the sidewalk of Bourbon Street with his hair flowing in the wind behind him. As an immediate reaction we are struck by the large “one way” sign pointing directly opposite where the man is walking. In this case, the incongruity is based on working against the indexical direction. The sign is part of a semiotic system that refers to vehicular and not foot traffic, so there is no legal or ethical reason why this man should not be walking in this direction. The opposition between the sign and the man, however, is so visually strong that it creates a visual incongruity that overpowers the logical knowledge that this is legitimate behavior.

Another striking, yet subtle, case of indexical visual comedy appears in Saint Tropez, 1968 (see Figure 17). Here we see a group of people on a boat casually conversing with each other. Towards the lower right, we see one older gentleman leaning
backwards and looking over his shoulder with a concerned expression on his face. He is looking at a hand reaching from out of sight and holding on the boat rail. The man’s gaze acts as an index drawing our attention to the hand. The owner of the hand is not visible in the picture, but as we examine the hand more minutely, we discover that it belongs, not to a person, but to a chimpanzee. If it were not for the man’s gaze and his unusual expression, we might very well miss this incongruity on a cursory examination of the photograph. Since our attention is drawn there, however, we must wonder why and how this hand (and the chimpanzee presumably attached to it) is in such an unusual location. This incongruity becomes comic.

**Visual Incongruity**

This category generally covers images that create incongruities in the sense that they appear not to obey natural laws or social norms and contradict expectations. This is a technique commonly used by Erwitt and is a clear refutation of Barthes’ argument that “the single photograph, contrary to the drawing, is very rarely (that is, only with much difficulty) comic; the comic requires movement, which is to say repetition (easy in film) or typification (possible in drawing), both these ‘connotations’ being prohibited to the photograph” (Image 25). One such example is *Saintes Maries de la Mer, France, 1977,* (see Figure 18) in which we see a man at the edge of the ocean apparently walking on top of a row of parked cars. This creates an incongruity because this is not expected behavior for a person. When we examine the image more carefully, we see through the car windows that there is some kind of a rocky bank behind the cars where the man is really walking. Once we have noticed this, we must reevaluate the situation and fit this new
information into the existing isotopy of a man walking on top of cars. When we discover that the two isotopies are incongruous and that the man is actually walking on a normal pedestrian surface, we have our cognitive resolution and we get the visual joke that Erwitt is showing us. In New York City, 1975 (see Figure 19) Erwitt plays a similar visual trope on us. Here we see at the top of the image a bird sitting on a lamp post. Because of the framing, far below the bird at the bottom of the image and visually smaller than the bird, is a jet airplane. The incongruity is that a bird is higher than an airplane and visually larger. In addition to that, the bird seems to be looking down on the airplane, and we might even attribute to the bird a sense of smug superiority based on its posture and the direction of its gaze.

In Nice, 1968 (see Figure 20), we see a man casually walking down the promenade at the beach and notice a long wet stain of liquid on the sidewalk starting from the edge of his shoes. Cognitively, we immediately attempt to decide what could make this stain and the most immediate and comic conclusion is that the man has urinated in his pants and it has dripped down onto the sidewalk. Because this behavior, which is not at all socially acceptable, seems to be coming from a well-groomed man in a suit, the incongruity becomes even greater. With additional study of the image and by thinking about the image, we conclude that the stain must be a result of some unrelated spill, but the initial visual incongruity is what causes our immediate and comic reaction.

Visual Parallelism

This category covers those images that make parallels between visually similar forms. This is much like Lessard’s description of syllepsis discussed earlier in the chapter.
In this type of picture, Erwitt is comparing two visually similar forms that are distinct entities and have distinct isotopies. The incongruity lies in the similarity of the form compared to the difference of the substance. *Florida Keys, 1968* (see Figure 21) is a good example of this type. Here we see the obvious visual similarity between the bird and the water spigot and are forced to compare the two because of their visual proximity and orientation in the frame.

**Visual Anthropomorphism**

This category describes those visual images that make explicit of implicit comparisons of people to animate or inanimate objects or vice versa and is really a subcategory of visual parallelism. Examples of this are numerous in Erwitt’s work. In *Venice, California, 1976* (see Figure 22), we are encouraged to make a comparison between a dead skirt of palm leaves at the base of the tree top and the man’s bushy beard and long hair. *San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1978* (see Figure 23) is also a good example of this category. Here we see a group of people all looking out to sea in the same direction. In the foreground we see a group of carved wooden statues in a similar pose, ostensibly looking at the group of people. Visually, the statues are attributed with the same characteristics as the group of people. This photograph is also a good example of indexical visual humor, as we are led by the groups’ lines of sight to make the cognitive comparison. *New York City, 1949* (see Figure 24) also utilizes a statue for comedic purposes. In this photograph we see a statue of a nude woman with a drawn bow and arrow seemingly aiming at a man walking down the hallway away from the viewer. There is a sense of dynamics in this picture as if the statue will really let loose her arrow. The
man’s hand also seems to be covering his buttocks as if he anticipates the attack or has just felt a sharp pain in the area. This reinforces the initial visual interpretation which assigns action to an inanimate object. The drawn arrow and the gaze of the statue also act as indexical characters to draw our attention to the retreating man.

Erwitt also makes numerous anthropomorphic comparisons of animals to people. He is particularly fond of dogs. He stated, “The dog pictures work on two levels. Dogs are simply funny when you catch them in certain situations, so some people like my pictures just because they like dogs. But dogs have human qualities, and I think my pictures have an anthropomorphic appeal. Essentially, they have nothing to do with dogs. . . I mean, I hope what they’re about is the human condition” (Personal 16). One example of this is found in the visual trick that he plays on his viewers in New York City, 1974 (see Figure 25). At a casual observation it appears that we have a shot below the knees of two people out walking a small dog dressed in a hat and sweater. The dog dressed as a person is a comedic anthropomorphism in itself, but upon more careful examination, we realize that we are not, in fact, seeing two sets of human feet, but one pair of booted human feet, and the front legs of a large dog. The similarity in stance, size and in the lines of the two sets of feet is so strong that at first glance, they are not noticeably different. Once we realize that we have been tricked by Erwitt’s angle and sense of composition into making a false assumption, we reevaluate our conclusions and modify our understanding of the isotopy. We now realize that this is a person walking two dogs (one large, one small) instead of two people walking one dog. One final example of this category is Erwitt’s Hungary, 1964 (see Figure 26). In this photograph,
we are forced to make a comparison between a gaggle of geese and a group of young women who are walking down the same road. Visually, they are grouped in a similar fashion. In addition, because it is not uncommon to compare a group of young women and a gaggle of geese as a verbal and conceptual metaphor, this picture appears to be a literalization of the metaphor. We can see through this visualization how this old stereotype came to be and continues to be considered a valid comparison.

**Contextual Juxtapositions**

This category is defined by incongruities that occur when things are placed in visual proximity to each other. This proximity forces comparisons between the different elements. Santa Cruz, U.S.A., 1975 (see Figure 27) provides a nice example of this phenomenon. In this picture we see two couples standing side by side in the sand at the beach. The couple on the right seems appropriate for the context, in casual clothing and in a fairly relaxed posture. The couple on the left stand relatively stiffly and appear to belong to a religious order that has carefully prescribed dress and grooming standards including traditional gender appropriate clothing with a beard for the man and a full traditional bonnet for the woman. They do not seem to belong in this context, yet the visual similarity in stance and location nevertheless connects them to the other couple with whom they appear to be conversing. The juxtaposition of these couples forces the viewer to compare and contrast, and the viewer is consequently left with a series of similarities and differences that do not allow for a clear and easy resolution. Huntsville, Alabama, 1974 (see Figure 28) forces us to make a similar comparison between the series of rockets and the Coca-Cola machine stuck in their midst. Visually there are some similarities.
They all have vertical orientations, they all have writing on them, and they all are metallic post-industrial constructions. The incongruity however, lies in the idea that despite their similarities, the Coca-Cola machine does not really belong in this group. It is not pointed like the others, it is the product of a commercial interest and not created by the government and despite how it appears in relation to the rockets surrounding it, it is unlikely to be able to travel to space. By visually grouping the Coca-Cola machine with the rockets, Erwitt forces the viewer to confront and attempt to resolve the incongruity, which creates the comedy inherent in the visual construction of the image.

While we could no doubt continue to create categories in which to place Erwitt’s work, these few are sufficient to illustrate the variety of ways that Erwitt creates visual incongruities and visual comedy. By continuing to create ever more specific categories, we would run the risk of defining terms beyond the point of which they will be useful. It should be clear by now that comedy can and does exist purely on a visual semiotic level. While we are forced to resort to linguistic means to communicate about how these images create comedy, the comedy itself is not relegated to the linguistic realm. Certainly, understanding visual elements requires a certain visual and cultural competency, but the humor of these images is inherent in their visual construction.

The development of a semiotic approach to visual comedy is not only important for what it contributes to the arena of visual arts, but as we shall see, is also important for other visual media such as film, which will be the central subject of the remaining chapters. Although the arenas of sculpture and dance are outside the scope of this work, the step between visual arts and these media, I think is a relatively small one. In that regard, visual
semiotics might be a good starting point for a study of those forms. Additionally, Veltruský suggests that music might also be profitably studied in comparison with and from the perspective of visual semiotics (252). These topics, however, will have to wait for another study as we turn our attention to the semiotics of comedy in film.
“Well who you gonna believe, me or your own eyes?”

-Chico Marx (Duck Soup)

Chapter 5: “There Ain’t No Sanity Clause” - Comedy and the Transformation of Semiotic Meaning in Marx Brothers Films

There is a significant tradition and body of work involving semiotic analysis of film. To date, however, little has been done to analyze film comedy using semiotic theories of comedy. Film is inherently interdisciplinary, having the potential to incorporate many of the semiotic systems that we have discussed, including narrative construction, linguistic humor, and theatrical and visual semiotics. Like visual arts, film can create incongruous images that are comedic in nature and due to its photographic iconicity and indexicality, it can appear very realistic. As in literature, film can develop a narrative structure that is inherently comedic and create comedic situations and dialogue. Film also can make use of actors’ abilities with tone, inflection, gesture, and movement to create comedy in much the same way as theater. Although the topic has not and will not be developed in depth in this work, music in film can also be used for comedic purposes. In addition, film has its own pseudo-grammatical structure as has been developed at length in the existing body of work on the semiotics of film. A few of the major figures in the field include Yuri Lotman, Christian Metz, and Gilles Deleuze. Although semiotic film theory has been developed in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes, we will be concentrating primarily on how comedy is created in film as an interdisciplinary endeavor rather than relying on semiotic film theory per se. In other words, although there are certain ways that comedy can undermine semiotic meaning that are specific to film (as we
will examine in more detail in the next chapter), we will discuss this only as part of our holistic approach to film comedy which incorporates many of the other semiotic systems which we have already discussed.

That having been established, it is useful to look at a few elements of semiotic film theory that can help us understand how comedy can be incorporated into and function at the level of filmic construction. One of the most important issues in semiotic film theory is the question of film grammar. Much has been said on this issue, but to briefly summarize, it has been argued that the basic element of film grammar (the equivalent of a word) is the shot. Shots are edited together to create longer scenes and sequences which are more or less equivalent to sentences. The sequences are laid out to create the narrative of the film. The parallels to literary construction and dramatic construction are obvious and common, even to the point where sections of mainstream screenplays are defined by the term “acts” as in dramatic literature. Even though a film cannot be read in the same way that a literary text can, its meaning becomes apparent at a higher level (Nöth 464). It is not possible to directly compare the shot with a word, because we are dealing with independent phenomena. Barthes argues, “when you see a revolver in the cinema, the revolver is not the equivalent of the word in relation to a larger group; the revolver is already in itself a sentence, obviously a very simple sentence, whose linguistic equivalent would be: here is a revolver” (Semiotic 186-7). Because film is a medium that is both visual and diachronic, we are dealing with an artistic medium that is carrying a wealth of information on various semiotic levels. This is important to us because it provides a variety of targets for semiotic subversion. Mast states, “The common view that there is a grammar and rhetoric
of film underscores the fact that cinematic technique is a kind of language. Whereas imagery in a literary form transmits itself verbally, imagery in the films is explicitly visual. Just as jokes, puns, wit, or comic imagery shape our reaction to a comic novel or play, a film’s cinematic ‘diction’ shapes our awareness that the action takes place in a comic or non-comic world” (12). Dorfles argues that the relatively new medium of film is uniquely suited for comedy. He comes to this conclusion based on a comparison between the mechanical nature and repetitive ability of film and Bergson’s theory of the mechanical as the source of comedy (Artificio 104). While, as we discussed in chapter one, Bergson’s theory proves to be ultimately inadequate as a theory of comedy, thus undermining Dorfles’ conclusions, there are some features of filmic construction that do allow it, as Dorfles suggests, to create comedy on a semiotic level that is unique to film. One of the most obvious means of accomplishing this is through editing. Instead of being confined to creating humorous incongruities within a single frame (synchronously), the technique of editing (which literally juxtaposes unrelated images) allows for incongruities between successive images (diachronically). This is similar to literary narrative, but has the advantage of being accompanied by an immediate and forceful visual signifying system as well. Incongruities created by such juxtapositions can also be enhanced or emphasized through manipulation of the soundtrack. This ability to create incongruities is essentially an expanded version of visual narrative as was discussed in connection with the work of Elliott Erwitt in the last chapter. Film also has an indexical ability which is similar, but far more broad and versatile than in photography. Film’s ability to point out objects can be done like still photography through framing and composition, but it also has the ability to
emphasize objects through camera movement, a property unique to film. The camera can literally move or zoom, forcing the viewers to look towards some incongruity. An editor can accomplish the same purpose by cutting to a closeup of the object or event. One of the other important elements of film is that it has the ability to create comedy in all of these ways at once and by synergistically combining and juxtaposing comedic elements from the variety of semiotic systems that it incorporates. Thus, film is ideally suited for an interdisciplinary study of comedy.

In the following analysis, we will be looking specifically at the films of the Marx Brothers as case studies for our exploration of semiotic comedy in film. This is not a radically new position, Barthes having once called the Marx Brothers film *A Night at the Opera* “a work which I regard as allegorical of many a textual problem” (Image 194). A large part of this analysis will focus on the linguistic qualities of the Marx Brothers’ humor. The Marx Brothers, as masters of comedic word play, provide an ideal basis through which to examine comedic techniques at a linguistic level. The Marx Brothers developed their comic style in the theatrical/linguistic venue of Vaudeville. Unlike the silent film comedians, the Marx Brothers did not have to rely exclusively on visuals to create comedy. Mast suggests that as soon as sound technology was available, filmmakers turned to more literary types of comedy (24). Because of this transition, filmmakers began mining sources of literary comedy often taking actors from Vaudeville. Because of the static nature of the Vaudeville stage and the limited mobility of early sound equipment, many of these early film comedies appear similar to stage productions. Indeed, the Marx Brothers’ first two films, *The Cocoanuts* and *Animal Crackers*, were based on their
Broadway stage plays of the same names. “In many cases, the films were so intent on serving up witty dialogue that they forgot to be cinematic. The camera remained stationary, frozen in its admiration of the well-appointed rooms and their well-dressed occupants” (Sennett 15). While Sennett is speaking of early comedies in general, his description is also true of the Marx Brothers’ earlier films. There is a static and staid quality to the camera work and they do not explore the full cinematic potential of film.

The Marx Brothers were not, however, strictly verbal comedians. In addition to examining the semiotic transformation and undermining of signifiers at a linguistic level in Marx Brothers films, we will also examine how signs and signifiers are subverted at the level of visual comedic structure through the pantomime of Harpo Marx. While many of these signs can be described as visual puns, there is communication occurring at a semiotic level that plays on cultural conventions to create meaning through the unusual juxtaposition of concepts. The humor of the Marx Brothers allows for a semiotic approach to comedy on verbal as well as visual levels.

**The Ludicrous Marx Brothers**

As has been mentioned earlier, comedy lies in the reversal of expectations. Things become funny when something is incongruous or unexpected. The pun and word play, in general, use this reversal of expectations often by employing words or concepts that are similar to each other in an unusual and unexpected fashion. For our discussion of incongruity in the Marx Brothers, we will return to Schopenhauer and his concept of the ludicrous. As has been mentioned, his theories comprise two major categories or species of the ludicrous. The first type is “the origin of the ludicrous is always the paradoxical,
and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in other respects heterogeneous to it” (Schopenhauer, Representation 2: 91) An example of the ludicrous, or this subsumption into a heterogeneous concept, would be found in a scene from the Marx Brothers’ film Horse Feathers. In this scene, Chico is the doorman to a speakeasy during prohibition, and he will not allow Groucho in until he tells him the password. During the course of the scene, Groucho learns the password and tricks Chico, and they end up switching places. Groucho eventually realizes that he has forgotten the password, and so decides he had better go out with Chico. The ludicrous is evident in that the person who is supposed to be guarding the door, in order to obey the rule of having to know the password, leaves when he forgets it. This is a situational example of how the ludicrous is comical, but will become more obviously a question of a semiotic reassignment of meaning when this same incongruity occurs on a linguistic level.

The second type of the ludicrous Schopenhauer describes as one going “in the opposite direction, namely from the abstract concept to the real thing of perception that is thought through this concept. But this real thing now brings to light any incongruity with the concept which was overlooked; and in this way there arises an absurdity, and consequently in practice a foolish action” (Representation 2: 96). Groucho Marx once said “I don’t care to belong to any club that will accept me as a member” (“Groucho Marx” Bartlett’s). Groucho is refusing membership in a club, in principle, because its standards for accepting members are too low. The specific problem, however, is that he, himself, is the kind of person with whom he objects to being in a club. The situation becomes patently ludicrous, because there is an incongruity created when Groucho’s
standards are too high to belong to an organization which allows people with standards as low as his own. Gerald Mast states, “One way that film comedies communicate serious thought about human values is to stimulate audience reflection on the ironies, ambiguities, and inconsistencies presented in the comedy” (15). This semiotic examination of comedy will ideally allow for not only a better understanding of linguistic and visual comedy, but of the functioning of comic inconsistencies in general.

As has been discussed, the basis of comedy on a semiotic level occurs when these signs that stand for something are reassigned to conflicting or incongruous meanings. This idea is related to Umberto Eco’s concept of uncoded determinants of interpretation. Eco states, “The interpreter of a text is at the same time obliged both to challenge the existing codes and to advance interpretive hypotheses that work as a more comprehensive, tentative and prospective form of codification” (Theory 129). Comedy, indeed, challenges existing codes and expands their descriptive abilities. In Saussure’s writings, langue is the set of underlying rules and codes of semiotics in language. Parole is individual speech acts. Linguistic semiotic humor works in part because it follows the rules of langue while creating incongruous or nonsensical examples of parole. This does just what Donahue argues should not be done. “Although arbitrary, the relationship of signifier to signified is a strict one that permits little fluctuation, for once joined together and inserted into a linguistic system they cannot be separated without upsetting the entire system” (21). In the process of upsetting the system, however, this multiple codification of the same word or phrase broadens the existing interpretation of the sign. This fits into the criterion described by Eco in which the “activity of sign production and interpretation nourishes and enriches the universe of codes” (Theory 129).
In attempting to describe a semiotic theory of comedy, Berger associates semiotic comedic theory with psychoanalytic and cognitive theories of comedy (5-7). Berger goes on to state: “Semiotics asks how meaning is generated in daily life and, for our purposes, in any text. It seeks to answer this question by analyzing the signification found in a given text and by trying to elicit the polar oppositions (or sets of paired opposites) implicit in any work” (5). Although, as Berger states, semiotic comedy is related to psychoanalytic and cognitive theories of comedy, these oppositions that he describes could be better understood in the context of the incongruity theory. Berger never specifically makes this comparison, instead, he alludes to the idea when, referring to a semiotic theory of comedy he states, “It argues that humor is best understood as dealing with communication, paradox, play and the resolution of logical problems” (4). As we have mentioned, this paradox is essential in the functioning of the incongruity theory.

Although the interplay between opposites is central to this idea of incongruity, it seems that something more subtle and subversive is going on as well. Eco states, “Semiotics must proceed to isolate structures as if a definitive general structure existed; but to be able to do this one must assume that this global structure is a simply regulative hypothesis and that every time a structure is described something occurs within the universe of signification which no longer makes it completely reliable” (Theory 129). Comedy is one of these things that is occurring which undermines this global structure. Comedy is a force that questions and complicates the existing structure of semiotic meaning.
When Peirce gave his definition of lunacy, perhaps he was somehow foretelling the advent of the Marx Brothers. “Besides, thoughts may have reasons, and indeed, must have some reasons, good or bad. But to ask why a quality is as it is, why red is red and not green, would be lunacy. If red were green it would not be red; that is all” (78). It is not that simple with the Marx Brothers. They question every convention and thus reveal the lunacy inherent in the assumptions on which the world operates. They are the kind of people who would ask why red is not green. Antonin Artaud called the Marx Brothers’ film *Monkey Business* a “hymn to anarchy and whole-hearted revolt” (qtd. in Jenkins 8). Indeed, much of the academic body of discussion about the Marx Brothers and their work focuses on this idea of anarchy and revolt against the established norms.

In order to examine how the Marx Brothers accomplish this revolt and undermine sign meanings at a linguistic level, we will return to the linguistic qualities inherent in Schopenhauer’s concept of the ludicrous as the tension or dichotomy of what is conceived and what is perceived (*Representation* 2: 98). Incongruity is created when we conceive one idea, but the reality of the perceived contradicts it. In terms of linguistic humor, this is accomplished through the application of the closely related linguistic forms of humor including wit, jokes, and puns.

The pun has at least two distinct forms. One is the use of a polysemous word. Depending on the context, it can mean a variety of different, sometimes opposing ideas (i.e. cleave as both to separate and to hold together). The other type of pun is one based on a homophone, or two words that sound alike. This becomes open to comedic semiotic transformation because, as in Saussure’s theory of the sign, the same sound image has two
distinct concepts. Although Saussure’s definition seems to be passive in nature, it is not unreconcilable with Schopenhauer’s more active definition as discussed in chapter one. Both agree that one word represents two different concepts. In Schopenhauer’s definition, this appears to be a more forceful comparison between the two incongruous definitions of the word, as in the Marx Brothers’ films. Punning, wit, and word play in general are actions that forcibly reassign meaning to a signifying word. Berger’s definition of misunderstanding is useful in understanding the power of language: “Misunderstanding is [...] a verbal matter that is tied, frequently, to the ambiguity of language or the strange meanings language generates when taken out of context. It is this ambiguity, of course, which also gives language its power” (43). The ambiguity of language is exactly what the Marx Brothers exploit for their comic reordering of the world.

While the Marx Brothers use the ambiguity inherent in language, they also create their own. In the film *The Cocoanuts*, Chico somehow manages to confuse the term “viaduct” for the phrase “Why a duck?” He then keeps asking this question “Why a duck?” a question completely irrelevant to the original context. This example shows how wide ranging this disassociation of meaning from the original context can become. “In principle, then, every object is available, capable of being separated from its original justification or context and remotivated as part of a new discourse. Thus the semiologue may draw on the encyclopedia of a society the same way a poet makes use of a dictionary” (Ulmer 39). The principle of semiotic humor lies, as we have argued, in taking a signifier and forcibly associating it with a new and incongruous concept. The presented incongruity between the two signs, whether they are words, phrases, ideas, or visual elements becomes ludicrous and therefore funny.
The Marx Brothers have long been famous for the way that they use and abuse language. Morreall states “Some pieces of humor even work a logical incongruity into an interchange between two characters so that not only is the incongruity accepted as if it made sense, but the person responding to the incongruous line actually builds on the incongruity” (Seriously 74). Durgnat makes a similar comparison: “Thus they tear language, and all the conventions and assumptions which language incorporates, apart, in just the same way as logicians caution students against bad logic—by inventing plausible logical and verbal patterns which half-procure one’s habit-blinded assent, but which lead straight into utter absurdity” (155). Lieberfeld and Sanders suggest that this process tends to undermine the conventions and assumptions that they address in areas such as the stereotype (6). While superficially this does not address a linguistic reassignment of semiotic meaning, stereotypes are signs that signify something to someone, they are conventional and are part of general encyclopedic knowledge. By undermining stereotypes, the Marx Brothers reassign those signs to different meanings. Gehring makes a more explicit comparison between the attack on institutions and the attack on language in the work of the Marx Brothers: “Their assault on the language produced a verbal slapstick every bit as iconoclastic as their attack on the establishment. Verbally as well as visually, their comic message remained the same: Things are not what they seem!” (Personality 90). Indeed, the Marx Brothers’ comedy emphasizes the absurdity of language and life through the incongruity that they produce.

In film, it is often difficult to ascribe a person or group as the author of a particular quality of the film. In the Marx Brothers’ films, as with most films, writers, directors, and
producers, all played a role in the finished product. There is ample evidence, however, that the Marx Brothers were intimately involved in the development and timing of their jokes. In terms of the proper emotional and cognitive context, comic timings can be very important. “Timing may be critical for two aspects of humor processing. First, in oral presentation the joke premise must be told in such a way that the listener has enough time to generate an (erroneous) expectation and therefore be surprised by the punch line. Provided with too much time the listener may anticipate the punch line correctly; provided with too little time no expectation will be generated” (Suls 54). Timing was important to the brothers who came from a Vaudeville background where they had the opportunity to develop and hone their timing and routines in front of live audiences. They continued that practice once they arrived on Broadway. The story is told of George S. Kaufman, author of the play version of *The Cocoanuts*, who was attending the show one night. He is reported to have said: “I may be wrong, [. . .] but I think I just heard one of the original lines” (Kanfer 93). This experience illustrates a tendency that the brothers had (which they continued throughout their film career) of straying from the script. “Many are the stories of the Marx Brothers (particularly Groucho) ad-libbing on the set. As a photograph of a page of script in *The Groucho Phile* [. . .] shows clearly, many last-moment revisions were made, and it would be accurate to say that the final product was often as much the creation of the Marxes as it was of the producers and screenwriters” (Galestin 241). The Marx Brothers are intimately involved in the semiotic reassignment of meaning in their comedy.
The Marx Brothers as Verbal Comedians

In the history of comedy, few comedians near the stature of the Marx Brothers as verbal comedians. Groucho is the brother most associated with this verbal play. The complexity of his labyrinthine statements indicates the capacity that he has to make and unmake linguistic and semiotic associations at will. If, as Roland Barthes suggests, “The logical future of metaphor would [...] be the gag” (qtd. in Ulmer 42), then Groucho is a master of metaphor. When he tells Margaret Dumont’s character in The Cocoanuts “your eyes–your eyes, they shine like the pants of a blue serge suit” he is only hinting at the transformative power of language. Here Groucho is taking a stock romantic metaphor and making a comparison to a decidedly unromantic object and thus associating two independent isotopies. Indeed, as Jenkins suggests of the Marx Brothers: “Dialogue functions less to reveal information about characters than to present gags; characters are reduced to stock roles and can be completely overpowered by the performer’s own personality” (130). Groucho, in some ways, is defined by his discourse which “tends not only to be marked by deviations from logical norms, or from the maxims of conventional communication, but also by insults and hostility, by deviations from the norms of decorum and good manners implicit in the rules of polite conversation and behaviour” (Neale and Krutnik 87). Groucho is able to interpret and reinterpret the world around him in ways that are indecipherable to most others. Deleuze states: “Groucho pushes the art of interpretation to its final degree, because he is the master of reasoning, of arguments and syllogisms which find a pure expression in nonsense” (199). Despite this proclivity for nonsense, Groucho (and to a to a certain degree Chico) has some clearly defined
techniques that he uses to exploit the existing linguistic and logical system to create a kind of pseudo-logic that has a variety of expressions.

One of the most obvious examples of how the Marx Brothers use a semiotic reassignment of meaning to produce humor is through the sometimes deceptively simple pun. Tiersma suggests that in the case of the pun sound similarity is crucial (8), but is not required to be identical (11). Often, as Freud suggests, the sound of the word is more important than its meaning (119). Many of the puns in Marx Brothers’ films involve multiple meanings for the same word. For example, in Duck Soup, Groucho, as head of a small country, offers Chico a job in his cabinet. “Now, let’s see, what have I got in my cabinet besides mice? How would you like a job in the mint?” To which Chico’s character responds “Mint? No, no, I no like-a mint. Uh–what other flavor do you got?” Here, in a very short space of time, we have two polysemous words reassigned by context into two entirely different concepts. An example of the use of homophones occurs in the Marx Brothers’ fourth film, Horse Feathers. Groucho, as new President of Huxley College, is addressing the student body. “Young lady, would you mind getting up so I can see the son rise?” whereupon she gets up and Groucho’s son in the film (brother Zeppo Marx) rises to greet him enthusiastically. Here the play in meaning is with a set phrase or idea, a rising “sun,” and a male offspring “son.” By comparing the isotopy of a “rising sun” to a “rising son,” Groucho associates two incongruous concepts with the same linguistic sound, thus presenting a conflict that can be resolved only in a comical context.

Not all of the puns are as clearly defined as the above examples. Sometimes the pun requires a much more violent reassignment of sound in order to create the semiotic
incongruity. In *The Cocoanuts*, when Groucho as hotel manager has to deal with a customer who wants “ice water” he comes up with the response. “Get some onions, they will make your eyes water.” Visually, this response appears to be a non-sequitur, but there is a great deal of phonic similarity between “ice water” and “eyes water.” While some of Groucho’s puns may be considered a bit of a stretch, Chico’s puns almost invariably require a much greater abuse of language in moving an idea from one context to another. Later in the same film, Groucho is talking with Chico and is telling him about a land auction that will be held later. He asks, “you know what an auction is, eh?” to which Chico replies. “I come from Italy on the Atlantic-Auction.” Of course a pun like this is not even possible without Chico’s forced, fake Italian accent, but it represents the power that the brothers have in their destruction and reassignment of the typical sign functions of language. We are able to accept and correctly disambiguate Chico’s abuse of the language because we have the sign competence and ability to categorize this word within both its appropriate signifying sets. Krampen states: “The question is not, however, one of any classification or establishment of sets whatsoever, but one of cognitive activity which sorts sounds, signals, or tools according to their ‘relevant’ properties—neglecting their non-relevant details” (68). In this way we can ignore the fact that “auction” does not really sound like “ocean” because we have been phonemically programmed to recognize wide variations in pronunciation (Krampen 68-9). Thus, we can accept both significations of Chico’s pronunciation. French states, “It is not merely that puns like the Marx Brothers’ fool around irresponsibly with words, but that (at their most inspired, anyway) they wrench a given utterance into a totally different and utterly irrelevant frame of
discourse, depriving it [. . .] of all reliable identity and of the possibility of its ever re-acquiring any” (44). This is exactly what Guiraud describes as a defunctionalization of language (Attardo 173). That the brothers recognize what is happening when they abuse language in this way is evident in Groucho’s response, “Well, let’s go ahead as if nothing happened.” He, like the audience, is aware that the phrase and words have been so greatly abused that there is no real hope reconciling the two divergent meanings on a semiotic level. It is a bad pun and we groan at the incongruities that it forces us to confront.

In these examples, “The strength of [. . .] words lies not so much in the images they generate but just in their sound” (Galestin 239). The sound of the words is the factor that, at a semiotic level, is allowing for the comparison of unlike and incongruous meanings. Rowland Barthes comments on the pun and why it amuses us. For Barthes, a pun “insists on keeping both meanings, as if one were winking at the other and as if the word’s meaning were in that wink, so that one and the same word, in one and the same sentence, means at one and the same time two different things, and so that one delights, semantically, in the one by the other. This is why such words are often said to be ‘preciously ambiguous’” (qtd. in Ulmer 43-4). There is play and some give and take in the comic reassignment of meaning.

Word play in general follows this same trend. Instead of one word being used to compare incongruous concepts, as in the pun, it is often entire phrases or sentences that are undermined. Tiersma identifies one of the types of word play in which the Marx Brothers indulge: “Idioms and fixed expressions are especially fertile ground for the creation of linguistic humor. Such expressions are not meant to be taken apart [. . .].
When the unit is split up, often by having it be taken literally (with each word having a value of its own, rather than having value only as part of the unit), humor may result” (14-15). One such set phrase is “keep your hands to yourself.” The ever lascivious Groucho, in talking to the beautiful blond gangster’s wife in *Monkey Business*, makes a small change which undermines the standard linguistic signification of the sentence. “Madam, you’re making history. In fact, you’re making me, and I wish you’d keep my hands to yourself.” In the sexually charged context of the situation the phrase “keep your hands to yourself” has the connotation rejecting sexual advances. As Tiersma states, Groucho’s modified statement “is especially effective because by changing one pronoun he has completely reversed the signification of the phrase” (16). Morreall argues that, “the humorous double entendre plays on meanings that are not just different, but in some way opposed to each other. Often the opposition is between a nonsexual meaning and a sexual meaning, particularly when the sexual meaning is taboo” ([*Seriously* 71]). Essentially what Morreall suggests is that by playing with subjects that are emotionally charged, the potential for comedy is increased.

The example from the Marx Brothers’ *Duck Soup* that we used in chapter one is illustrative of how Groucho can join and create an incongruity from two stock phrases at a semiotic level. Groucho says to Chico, “I’ve got a good mind to join a club and beat you over the head with it.” Here the phrases “join a club” and “beat with a club” are conjoined through the polysemous meanings of the word club. The conflict between the two incompatible ideas that are here joined together under one signifier, or what Monro calls a “hook” (138), produces the incongruity that leads to humor.
Groucho’s statements in particular can become complex conglomerations or chains of verbal transformations of semiotic meaning. In describing Groucho, McCaffrey states, “He often ventured onto weird tangents, in a stream of conscious establishment of his wacky ideas on just about everything and anything. A word or phrase often sparked a chain reaction of delightful pseudo-logic that almost sounded valid” (74). One such example occurs in Horse Feathers as Groucho is lecturing to a class: “Now, in studying your basic metabolism, we first listen to your heart beat... and if your hearts beat anything but diamonds and clubs... it’s because your partner is cheating, or your wife.”

Groucho starts out talking about anatomy and then, using his own pseudo-logic, moves through cards and then to marital relations. There is, in each case, a linguistic connection, either by use of a polysemous word or a variation on a stock phrase, but logically the concepts are unconnected and incongruous. “He substitutes the quantity of sound and the illusion of rational connection for the theoretical purpose of talk–logical communication” (Mast 282). This technique connects widely divergent concepts by employing an idea similar to what Wittgenstein described as a strand in a rope, as described in chapter two. Each strand begins and ends, but by following the strands we can arrive at a very different place than where we started all the while remaining a continuous part of the logical rope.

Galestin describes this complex form of linguistic transformation:

Groucho’s best verbal volleys are so fast that it is difficult to unravel what he is actually saying. It is the fleeting impressions made on the mind that count. He so misuses cliches of form and expression, using false analogies, emotionally coloured phrases in the wrong context, or simply misplaced
words, that the general effect on the hearer is one of stunned exasperation.

(239)
The complexity of this transformation makes reconciling the incongruities in the presentation a semiologically difficult task. This further emphasizes the Marx Brothers’ willingness and ability to undermine conventional linguistic signification.

Sometimes verbal humor will be used to transform existing signifying representations for comic purposes. For example, when Harpo and Chico bring in blocks of ice in *Horse Feathers*, Groucho asks how much he owes. When Chico responds that it is two thousand dollars, Groucho is indignant. “Two thousand dollars for ice? I can get an Eskimo for two hundred dollars and make my own ice.” Upon any kind of reflection, this statement is, of course, absurd. Eskimos do not make ice; they just live in icy climates. Because the Eskimo is isotopically connected to a cold and icy climate, there is already an existing signification of those elements associated with or connoted by the Eskimo. Groucho undermines that signification through his nonsensical interpretation. Similarly when Groucho tells Chico in *At the Circus*, “I’ll bet your father spent the first year of your life throwing rocks at the stork.” he undermines the positive association that the stork conventionally has as a figure who brings “bundles of joy.”

At times, the Marx Brothers purposely change the conventional meaning of signifiers, but provide no parallel construction within which to make sense of the semiotic act. This could be described as nonsense. In a scene from *Animal Crackers*, Groucho as Captain Jeffrey T. Spaulding says that the “T” in his name stands for “Edgar.” This shows the ultimate contempt that the brothers have for language’s conventional semiotic
meaning. Middle initials, by convention, are the first letter of a person’s middle name and thus synechdochally signify that middle name. In Groucho’s case, however, he has completely flouted convention and uses a middle initial that not only does not accurately signify his middle name, but bears no resemblance to it whatsoever. It makes no logical or conventional sense and is therefore nonsense, an undermining of the conventions of language as a whole.

Another example of how the conventions of language are completely negated occurs in *Horse Feathers*. After an argument with his son, Groucho tells him to go. Zeppo starts to leave when Groucho stops him and says “Where’re you going?” He replies “Well, you just told me to go.” Groucho, in classic form, responds. “So that’s what they taught you in college! Just when I tell you to go, you leave me.” The conventional definition of the verb “to go” requires Zeppo (who, as the straight man in the film, obeys convention) to leave. Groucho, who is not constrained by semiotic conventions, expects his son to stay. He transforms the words “to go” and “to leave” which are conventionally synonyms into antonyms. Durgnat describes the result of this kind of language use: “This use of language reads negatively, because it is a destruction of language, a demonstration of its falsity, of its conventional functioning, a concealment and alienation” (155).

**The Marx Brothers as Visual Comedians**

The Marx Brothers not only deconstruct language at a semiotic level, they also play with visual representations of meaning. Harpo is the Marx Brother most associated with non-verbal comedy and McCaffrey credits him with coming up with the majority of
this type of humor in the brothers’ films (77). During his film career, he never spoke on screen, but instead developed elaborate visual humor, much of which could only exist in a visual medium such as film. Puns and verbal humor in general do not translate well, which is, perhaps, why Harpo is the Marx Brother who seems to have had the most international success, notably including a tour in Soviet Russia (Marx and Barber). Mast calls the Marx Brothers “curious hybrids of silent and sound principles” (25). Indeed this particular form of comedy seems to be a mix between visual and verbal humor. Galestin states, “A unique feature of the Nonsense of the Marx Brothers’ films, which I have never seen anywhere else on the screen, is what I would call the visually presented verbal pun” (244).

Examples of this are plentiful in the Marx Brothers’ films. In *Horse Feathers*, Groucho, as the president of a small college, is searching for the official seal to legitimate a college document that he is writing. He says, “Wait a minute. This isn’t legal. There’s no seal on it. Where’s the seal?” Harpo then brings in a seal, in this case, an aquatic mammal. This exemplifies how the visual pun works on both a visual and a linguistic level. The same word is used to refer to two completely dissimilar isotopies which then has its fulfillment not in a linguistic sign, but in a physical embodiment of an incongruous linguistic idea. Schopenhauer’s theory of incongruity or the ludicrous comes into play when an aquatic mammal is suddenly and paradoxically associated with a bureaucratic verification instrument. Harpo is, in fact, doing the same kind of thing visually as the others do verbally (Galestin 243).

Other examples abound in the Brothers’ films. In *Horse Feathers*, when Harpo overhears a card player say “cut the cards,” he pulls out a hatchet and proceeds to do
precisely that. Gehring suggests that, “This also reinforces a basic Marx Brother credo that things, especially the language, are not always what they seem to be” (Parody 61). This is also a clear example of what Dorfles suggests is a cinematic literalization of metaphoric expression or the figurative rendered concrete (Artificio 114-5). Later in the same film, Harpo and Chico are trying to kidnap some football players and arrive with their bag of tools to break into their apartment. Chico says to Harpo in his exaggerated Italian accent, “Did you bring the tools? You got the shovel, the axe, and the pick?” Harpo pulls out the shovel and the axe and Chico responds, “Where’s the pick?” Harpo opens the bag further to reveal a live pig instead of a pick. Chico gets mad at Harpo for his misunderstanding and says, “No. That’s-a no pick. That’s a hog. Don’t you know what a hog is?” whereupon Harpo tries to hug him. The confusion in language based on Chico’s accent in this scene parallels similar verbal exchanges with Groucho. The difference is that Harpo reassigns semiotic meaning on a visual level. He substitutes a visual semiotic system for a verbal one.

Closely related to this visual pun is Harpo’s unique brand of sign language. It is like a surreal game of charades which Durgnat describes as “a sort of punning sound language” (155). In the film Night at Casablanca, Harpo and Chico carry on an extended conversation using this punning language. Deleuze describes this kind of conversation between the brothers: “Harpo proposes to Chico the enigma of a language of gestures, in a series of mimes that Chico must constantly guess in order to extract a proposition from them” (199). Harpo is trying to reveal a detailed murder plot which he has overheard. During this conversation he has to get across the idea that one of the people involved is a
lady with a dog. He tells Chico what kind of dog it is by hiding his eyes and showing his knee which Chico eventually figures out is Pekinese. He then discovers that the woman involved is Beatrix when Harpo mimes a bee and then makes a twisting motion. It is important to recognize that linguistic communication even between the brothers is subject to misunderstanding. Harpo is attempting to indicate to Chico that there is a woman involved by carving out a curved shape with his hand. Chico misunderstands him and thinks that he is miming a snake. Harpo then tries a different tactic and shows off his leg as if it were the leg of a beautiful woman. Chico still not understanding jumps to the conclusion that it is a garter snake. While this is a logical conclusion based on the signals that he has received from Harpo, it is a mistaken understanding of the intended message. He is confined within his constructed isotopy without being aware of the one that Harpo is trying to define.

Like Groucho, Harpo also is able to question the semiotic basis of expressions and cliches, but on a visual level rather than a verbal one. For example, in *Animal Crackers* there is some question whether or not a check is good. Harpo drops it and it literally bounces. By taking a stock phrase and providing a literal, but nonsensical interpretation of it, he calls into question its very construction. Similarly when the famous art critic, Roscoe W. Chandler calls for “Three cheers for Captain Spaulding” in *Animal Crackers*, Harpo arrives, instead, with three chairs. Perhaps the ultimate gesture of Harpo’s disdain for and disregard of language is found in *Monkey Business*. Harpo is seen standing beside a restroom sign that is clearly marked “Men.” A man walks into the restroom only to be thrown out a few seconds later. He stares at the door and then at the “men” sign and then
runs off in confusion. Harpo then gets up from where he is leaning against the wall and reveals that he has been covering the “Wo” in the word “Women.” Harpo, a creature who not only exists but thrives without words, has little regard for others’ reliance on them.

The Marx Brothers are also able to deconstruct even the most basic conventions of meaning. When Harpo is offered a hand to shake, he invariably offers his leg instead. In this way, a basic physical signal of friendship or goodwill is undermined. Mast describes this tendency of Harpo’s in slightly different terms. “And nothing so disarms Harpo’s opponents as his constant urge to press his stomach against theirs or to hook his knee around their hands and arms. This intimate physical contact is violently antisocial, violating social codes of distance, propriety, and masculinity” (Mast 284). No code or signifying system is safe from the Marx Brothers.

Other physical elements which would seem to have concrete references as signs also lose their meaning in the world of the Marx Brothers. A violin bow becomes a sword to the brothers in what Ulmer calls a refunctioning of the instruments (45). Groucho’s trademark moustache, one of the signs most used in caricatures or representations of him is not a real moustache, but a greasepaint moustache that merely signifies a real moustache. Even real people no longer signify themselves in the world of the Marx Brothers. In *Monkey Business*, the Marx Brothers are attempting to get past customs officials by impersonating French singer Maurice Chevalier whose passport they have acquired. As French notes, “since none of them looks remotely like the photo in the passport, each has to pretend to establish his credentials by singing one of the Frenchman’s songs” (43). The way to identify a person in this world is not through their
physical person, but synechdochally through a single quality of signification, in this case, a song. It is a song for which Maurice Chevalier is signified throughout the world. Interestingly, it is Harpo, the mute, who comes closest to convincing the immigration officials before they discover that he is using a record player and lip syncing. Not only are the linguistic signification of individual phrases questioned by the Marx Brothers, but this scene emphasizes how the very act of linguistic signification is shown to be questionable. The source of the linguistic meaning of the event in this scene is not what it appears to be.

Despite the clearly innovative nature of the Marx Brothers’ comedy, it is a type of comedy not without precedent. Mast suggests that their humor is not a result of the new filmic medium, but that it has far older roots. “For the brilliance of the Marx Brothers’ comedy had much more to do with their essential comic spirit than their use of cinema. More than any other comedians of the sound era, the Marx Brothers were descendants of the most ancient ribald comedy” (287). Indeed, the Marx Brothers, at least in their early films, are clear examples of Old Greek comedy as discussed in chapter one with its emphasis on destruction and deconstruction. Taplin describes Old Comedy in terms that are reminiscent of much of the brothers’ comedic style:

Greek comedy in the age of Aristophanes was pervasively metatheatrical—it was for ever playing with its own playness. The traditional term has been ‘breaking the dramatic illusion’; but that has drawbacks in that it implies that an illusion like that set up by tragedy is also characteristic of comedy, and that at any one time it is either intact or broken. This does not allow for the fluid and variegated self-referentiality of Old comedy, which seldom
if ever loses sight of its own theatricality, yet seldom if ever completely
drops the fantasy it has designed and accumulated. (67)
The Brothers likewise frequently break the narrative to interact with the audience. One
has only to look at scenes like the “strange interlude” scene in Animal Crackers (a satire of
Eugene O’Neill’s Strange Interlude, then a big Broadway hit) where Groucho steps
forward and out of the narrative to talk to the audience to see a clear parallel to a Greek
chorus’ parabasis which “consists of a direct and often pointed address to the audience
that often takes up topics only peripherally related to the action of the play” (Olson 12).
Another clear example of this is in Horse Feathers when Groucho looks at the camera and
says, “I’ve got to stay here, but there’s no reason why you folks shouldn’t go out into the
lobby until this thing blows over.” The parallels are not limited to verbal or stylistic
similarities, but also to the characters themselves. Harpo especially has been specifically
compared with a satyr on account of his wild, animalistic pursuit of anything female (Mast
284). One of the clearest stylistic influences on the brothers is much more modern.
Antonin Artaud, the Surrealist French playwright saw in the Marx Brothers’ work “the
liberation through the medium of the screen of a particular magic which the ordinary
relation of words and images does not customarily reveal, and if there is a definite
characteristic, a distinct poetic state of mind that can be called surrealism, Animal
Crackers participated in that state altogether” (qtd. in Bergman 32). Indeed, Surrealists
were so interested in the Surrealistic nature of the Marx Brothers comedy that Salvador
Dali painted a picture of Harpo Marx and even gave him a harp stringed with barbed wire
(Mitchell 191). The Surrealists saw in the Marx Brothers a type of humor similar to what
they were attempting to accomplish through other means. In both cases, the existing semiotic systems are being subverted and undermined to create incongruity, and in the Marx Brothers’ case, this incongruity has a purely comic intent.

The Marx Brothers take existing semiotic signification and completely disrupt its conventional meaning. By their incongruous juxtaposition of irreconcilable concepts they produce humor. Whether that humor takes the form of a complex verbal transformation of meaning, a visual undermining of a conventional symbolic meaning, or the simple pun, it undermines and questions the very nature of semiotic meaning. The Marx Brothers emphasize the ludicrous, the incongruous, and the nonsensical, at the expense of logic and sanity. In Night at the Opera, Groucho and Chico are trying to settle on a singing contract for the opera star whom Chico represents. Rather than disagree on the signifying elements elaborated in the contract, they decide to tear out clauses one by one until only a small scrap of paper is left. Groucho tries to get Chico to sign the contract, but Chico says he cannot write, which is okay by Groucho because there’s no ink in his pen, anyway. When Chico notices the writing on the small piece of paper, Groucho explains that the clause is standard. It says, “if any of the parties participating in this contract is shown not to be in their right mind, the entire agreement is automatically nullified.” Chico is hesitant, but Grouch reassures him. “It’s all right. That’s – that’s in every contract. That’s – that’s what they call a sanity clause.” Chico’s heavily accented response is in many ways a summation of what is left of the world of semiotic meaning after the Marx Brothers have finished with it: “You can’t fool me! There ain’t no sanity clause.”
“I felt the sense of atmosphere was important. Terry and I were big fans of Pasolini because I always felt his films had a great sense of time and place and they were really real. So we set out to do a Pasolini film.”

-Terry Gilliam (Chapman et al., Autobiography 259)

Chapter 6: A Grail Shaped Beacon - Semiotics and Satire in Monty Python and the Holy Grail

This chapter focuses on humor as it is created in broadly-based social and historical sign systems. This is done to illustrate the versatility of semiotics which can be used to describe how comedy functions on basic levels from the level of the tekmerion (or Barthes’ sure index), to complex social, literary, and historical sign systems. In addition, I will illustrate how Monty Python is able to create humor by exploiting the cinematic form itself. Through this analysis, I hope to show not only the interdisciplinary nature of a semiotic approach to comedy, but also one of the many types of possible semiotic film analyses, one that relates comedy to its historical, philosophical, and social background.

The Legend of King Arthur is replete with signs and symbols, elements that were central to the philosophical views in the Middle Ages. It is a legend that has continued to generate meaning since that time, having been interpreted in various ways over the centuries. Monty Python and the Holy Grail uses the signs from Arthurian Legend, such as the sign designating Arthur as king and the sign of the Holy Grail, in what Brilli describes as a mosaic of citations (18), to satirically reinterpret their signification and comment on modern society. While parody of Arthurian Legend is not new with Monty
Python, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* represents an attempt to take the signifying events in Arthurian Legend and, through a starkly incongruous reassignment of the meaning of those signs, produce humor and social satire.

**The Medieval Sign**

The importance of symbols and signs to the medieval consciousness is something that has been carefully documented and played a central role in daily and religious life. While the significance of signs would eventually spread to all aspects of life, the idea of universal symbolism in medieval thought and culture arguably originated with St. Augustine (Manetti, *Antiquity* 162). Augustine stated, “Thus one thing signifies another thing and still another either in such a way that the second thing signified is contrary to the first or in such a way that the second thing is entirely different from the first. [. . .] For what could God have more generously and abundantly provided in the divine writings than that the same words might be understood in various ways which other no less divine witnesses approve?” (qtd. in Arthur 8-9).

Seeing symbolism or signification in everything became an idea central to the medieval mind. “The Medievals inhabited a world filled with references, reminders and overtones of Divinity, manifestations of God in things. Nature spoke to them heraldically: lions or nut-trees were more than they seemed; griffins were just as real as lions because, like them, they were signs of a higher truth” (Eco, *Art* 53). Although Tabarroni argues that even today “A history of the theory of signs in the Middle Ages has not yet been written, nor can we say that this territory has been, if not only timidly, explored” (195), it appears certain that a generalized understanding of the nature and purpose of signs and
symbols already existed in the Middle Ages:

[. . .] the educated reader and writer of the period had access to a considerable amount of material about signs and their functions. [. . .] In addition to the explicit formal system, found in the elementary writings on logic that formed a basic part of every scholar’s education, contemporary works on heraldry and various sermons and doctrinal pieces relied on implicit knowledge of similar principles. (Arthur 7)

While the system of meaning may not have been thoroughly codified with explicit meanings assigned to specific signs, the world or cosmological system that the symbols described was one of order. Each idea ranked in a hierarchical order based on its importance. Something with a higher idea or concept could be represented by a greater number of things, thus emphasizing its importance. “Embracing all nature and all history, symbolism gave a conception of the world, of a still more rigorous unity than that which modern science can offer. Symbolism’s image of the world is distinguished by impeccable order, architectonic structure, hierarchic subordination” (Huizinga Wa 187). Thus, Christ, the greatest of all in the medieval world, could be signified by a cross, a fish, a pelican, a walnut, or even a grail.

Such an overreaching ontological view of the world is not without its problems. Huizinga states, “All life was saturated with religion to such an extent that the people were in constant danger of losing sight of the distinction between things spiritual and things temporal. If, on the one hand, all details of ordinary life may be raised to a sacred level, on the other hand, all that is holy sinks to the commonplace, by the fact of being blended
with everyday life” (Waning 140). This excessive use of symbolism becomes trite and falls out of fashion. Indeed, such a complete reliance on symbolism to understand the world has long since lost its appeal. Eco describes this tendency to look at the world in terms of symbols as “perhaps its most typical aspect, the one which characterises the period above all others and which we tend to look upon as uniquely medieval” (Art 52).

**King Arthur and the Holy Grail**

The use of signs and symbols were not held exclusively to Biblical accounts and characters. The Legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table were also caught up in this medieval mind set. The surviving information of a historical figure named Arthur is relatively scarce. Lampo cites two references to an Arthur in the *Annales Cambriae* which mention his participation in a battle which repelled the enemy and his death in 518 A.D. and 539 A.D., respectively (24). This is the start of a critical period in British history, a period where “the English kings changed from warlords who exacted submission by force into law-givers to whom obedience was a moral duty” (Williams ix). After this reference, however, Arthur is not mentioned again until 829 when Nennius, a Welsh cleric, uses his name in his *History of the Britons* in which he tries “to evoke past grandeur, to bolster the Britons’ self-respect and to refute the accusation that they excel only in stupidity” (Lampo 24). His persona was appropriated as a hero exemplar from the past. “What inspired the Welsh poets, however, was not the hero himself, whoever he may have been, but an idea, an idea which was a rallying-call to a people in retreat, driven by the Saxons into the western extremities of the land that had once been theirs” (Barber, Legends 1). Arthur became a symbol of freedom from oppression.
One of the important figures in creating the legends around Arthur was Geoffrey of Monmouth who completed his *History of the Kings of Britain* in 1135. “Seeking to record what scraps he could find of the Welsh past, he shaped a history of the British people which matched the exploits of Rome and France, in which Arthur almost conquers Rome, echoing the careers of the emperors of the later Roman period who began as British generals. It was fiction, but far from implausible, and it caught the imagination of his contemporaries” (Barber, *Legends* 2). This proved to be so popular that “it was able to deceive historians for six hundred years into a false view of the period it covered. The romantic history of Geoffrey of Monmouth has permanently coloured our idea of Arthur” (Barber, *King Arthur* 46). The romantic view of Arthur and his court developed into an institution of considerable pride for the English that continued to be revered and believed even in the face of later criticism of a lack of evidence of Arthur and his reign. Dean states, “One reason why most Englishmen stubbornly held fast to their belief in Arthur was an understandable pride in England’s glorious past and a reluctance to give this up for a less splendid picture [. . .]” (25-6).

Besides being a symbol of English glory and independence, Arthur began to be associated with other symbols that would endure as icons throughout history. “The Round Table and the Holy Grail are dream-symbols, born out of the longing for justice and grace in an imperfect, brutal world” (Barber, *King Arthur* 7). While there are considerable variations in details of the story of Arthur and his Knights, some ideas remain fairly constant: one is that Arthur was chosen by divine right to be King. In the legend, this divine approval is signified by Arthur’s pulling of the sword from the stone. This was
described as a prophecy which Arthur, as an innocent youth, fulfilled. He breaks the sword shortly thereafter, but he receives another symbol of his divine right to rule. The mysterious Lady of the Lake gives him the sword Excalibur. This magical event is further proof of his symbolic right to be king and when he dies the sword is taken back to the Lady in the Lake, signifying the end of Arthur’s chosen era.

Another major symbol that would become associated with Arthurian Legend was the legend of the Holy Grail. The Grail was reported to have been both the cup that Christ drank from at the Last Supper and the cup that caught his blood when he was on the cross. Legends of the Grail began to develop around the stories of Arthur and his Knights in the 1190s and spread rapidly (Barber, Legends 2). By the mid-thirteenth century, a clear history of the Grail from Christ to Joseph of Arimathea up until the days of King Arthur had developed (Barber, Legend 2-3). The Grail became a symbol of Christ and his holiness, a clear indication of the divinity and blessed nature of the reign of King Arthur. “The events of The Quest for the Holy Grail show that the Round Table and the Grail are inextricably linked, and that the achievement of the Grail quest is to be the spiritual apogee of Arthur’s rule” (Barber, King Arthur 74). Something as significant as the Holy Grail is accompanied by its own set of signs and wonders that begin to appear as the quest draws near (Matthews, King Arthur 103). A vision of the Grail appears to the Knights one day as they sit down for supper:

But at once there shone upon them a ray of sunlight which made the palace seven-fold brighter than it was before. And straightway they were as if illumined with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and they began to look at one
another; for they knew not whence this experience had befallen them.

Then . . . there entered in the Holy Grail covered with a white cloth; but no one was able to see who was carrying it. (Matthews, *King Arthur* 105)

This scene illustrates the mystical and symbolic nature of the Grail. It is not only illuminated with God’s light and the Holy Spirit, but it is carried as if by an unseen hand. Truly this was the start of a quest worthy of the most incredulous of medieval sign seekers.

**Laughing at the Legend**

As has been consistently argued throughout this work, comedy tends to undermine and point out limitations of institutions or established ideas and practices. The concept of chivalry and the Legends of King Arthur are no exceptions. Huizinga argues that this criticism of chivalry is something that occurred shortly after the laws of chivalry were formalized. “Those who upheld the chivalric ideal were aware of its falsity, and it is for this reason that—almost from the very beginning—there was a tendency for the ideal to deny itself from time to time in irony and satire, parody and caricature” (*Men* 89). While this is true of chivalry in general, the Arthurian Legend was also subject to this satire. Matthews cites two examples of early Arthurian satire: “The Knight of the Parrot” and “Hunabaut,” but makes it clear that these were exceptions to the rule and that most stories about King Arthur took their topic very seriously (*Unknown* 138). Nevertheless, it is significant that these early satires or comedic looks at Arthurian Legend exist.

One of the ways that this satirical tendency becomes clear is by briefly examining one body of visual images of the era. Part of the culture of the period was to embody
ideas symbolically in images. Huizinga states, “Towards the end of the Middle Ages two factors dominate religious life: the extreme saturation of the religious atmosphere, and a marked tendency of thought to embody itself in images” (Waning 136). Arthurian Legends and signs were also set down in a visual format. “The greatest Arthurian works of art from the middle ages are of course the miniatures in illuminated manuscripts. An artistic tradition of how the cycle of romances should be depicted developed from the mid-thirteenth century” (Barber, King Arthur 130). The most useful element for describing the satire of Arthurian images is not in the miniatures, themselves, but the drawing in the margin.

In his book, Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art, Michael Camille describes the tendency of illuminations on the margins of manuscripts to offer an ironic or irreverent commentary on the content. Camille states that this practice became so common that “By the end of the thirteenth century no text was spared the irreverent explosion of marginal mayhem” (22). Arthurian literature was primarily courtly literature and was not spared this attack (Barber, King Arthur 126). Camille describes one reason why medieval images were such easy targets for satirists: “The medieval image-world was, like medieval life itself, rigidly structured and hierarchical. For this reason, resisting, ridiculing, overturning and inverting it was not only possible, it was limitless. Every model had its opposite, inverse anti-model” (26). Images in Arthurian manuscripts show how illuminators were able to play with the serious nature of the Arthurian Legend. Figures getting shot with arrows in the buttocks are common images in thirteenth-century manuscripts (Camille 100) (see Figures 29 and 30). Camille argues, however, that the
significant religious elements in these courtly manuscripts are treated quite seriously: “it is ironic that medieval secular manuscripts [...] often treat religious themes more seriously than liturgical books, where marginal undermining abounds!” (108). It is clear that the Arthurian Legend and the images that accompany the Arthurian manuscripts became a subject of satire. This trend of Arthurian literary and iconic satire, in many ways, reaches its culmination in Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

**Monty Python and Modern Parody**

Monty Python was a comedy team formed by Graham Chapman, Terry Jones, Terry Gilliam, Michael Palin, Eric Idle, and John Cleese. Most of the men had been educated at Oxford or Cambridge, as their literary and informed humor frequently demonstrated (Neale and Krutnik 6). They created a show on the BBC called Monty Python’s Flying Circus where they developed their comic style. Larsen states of the Monty Python troupe: “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. The wildly anarchic structure of the show and the often topical satire attracted, at first, a cult following” (19). They were able to capture the attention of a generation that was ready to mock and fight against the traditions and conventions of society:

It is no accident that the comedy produced by the Oxbridge generation succeeded in capturing audiences throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, at a time when education in general, and higher education in particular, was rapidly expanding in Britain. [...] It was an audience that, for the first
time, grew up with television, that was just as aware as the writers and
performers of its massive expansion, of its provenance, and of its
developing conventions and forms. (Neale and Krutnik 207)

Monty Python was bold in its satire. They mocked a multitude of institutions, including
the Church of England, the British government, foreign relations, the military,
lumberjacks, and even philosophers.

Monty Python’s humor has often been described as bizarre or grotesque, but much
of it can be described more usefully by the incongruity theory. Particularly useful is his
concept of the ludicrous which, as described in chapter one, has to do with a concept or
object suddenly and paradoxically being placed into a new category or context. For
example, the traditional conception of a knight of King Arthur’s Round Table is a brave
and fearless warrior. In Monty Python and the Holy Grail, however, Brave Sir Robin (as
he is usually called) is a frightened and timid person who repeatedly loses control over his
bowels at the thought of danger and will do anything to avoid a fight. This is ludicrous
because a frightened knight is subsumed (to use Schopenhauer’s term) under the
conventional idea that knights are brave and this incongruity becomes humorous.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail could well be described as an escape from the
authority of logic as Schopenhauer describes it (Representation 2: 98). The small budget
film was shot in 1974 and released in 1975, shortly after the height of the troupe’s success
with Monty Python’s Flying Circus. The film, which originally started out as a story
moving back and forth between the Middle Ages and the present, was eventually
transformed to a straight (for Monty Python) period piece (Chapman et al., Grail). Terry
Gilliam (who co-directed the film with Terry Jones) said of the film: “What was striking at the time, and seems even clearer now, is how much Monty Python and the Holy Grail is really quite a serious medieval movie disguised as a spoof. Even Leslie Halliwell couldn’t resist praising its ‘remarkable visual sense of the Middle Ages’” (58). Creating a serious setting was a conscious decision on the part of the cast and crew. Michael Palin said that he was interested in historical accuracy in the making of the film. “I was more keen on keeping the narrative in the Arthurian world than making jokes about Harrods. I was interested in creating this world and making the convention, the background setting, so convincing that you don’t have to defuse it, you don’t have to apologize for it, you don’t want to leave it!” (qtd. in Larsen 66-7). The troupe approached the project in a serious fashion, borrowing stylistic techniques from directors such as Pasolini and Bergman (Gilliam 58 and McBride 32). “We were doing comedy, but we didn’t want it to look like light entertainment” (Gilliam 58). To create their world, they tried to make as realistic a setting as possible. George Perry describes Gilliam’s vision as director of the film: “He sees the Middle Ages . . . as an astonishingly dirty period, with people much the same as today, except that they have to wade through mire, animal ordure, and the mountains of frightful garbage” (qtd. in Thompson 19). Gilliam believed that the grittiness and realism of the setting made the jokes funnier in comparison (Gilliam 60).

The irony in describing the realism and historical accuracy of Monty Python and the Holy Grail is that the film is full of historical inaccuracies. Larsen points out numerous elements including the armor, the heraldic patterns, the political history, and even the lettering in the film as examples of historical inaccuracies (67). Monty Python has created
a sort of historical conglomeration of details which, they feel, represents or signifies the Middle Ages. The specific historical circumstances are not as important as the general air of authenticity of the film. The reason that this does not create a comedic incongruity is that the majority of the audience is relying on a generalized understanding of the time period or what is described by Eco as a nuclear content and does not have a specific enough encyclopedic knowledge or what Eco calls a cognitive type (Platypus 141) to recognize the incongruities. Because of this lack of specific knowledge, the only things that register as incongruities in this respect are the ones seen as really inappropriate for the time frame such as the presence of a modern police force and vehicle at the end of the film. Whatever formula that Monty Python stumbled into, the film was unquestionably a success. Audiences and critics in America and Britain praised Monty Python and the Holy Grail (Johnson, K., 203). Critics praised its technical aspects and acting (McCabe 55) while audiences seemed to enjoy the satire of the then current state of Britain and the witty dialogue (McBride 32). The continued popularity and cult status of the film since its release indicate that the humor used in it is timeless.

**Grinning about the Grail**

Monty Python takes many of the signs of the Middle Ages and reassigns their meanings or contexts. This semiotic subversion is paralleled by Schopenhauer’s understanding of the ludicrous. In this case, signs are given distinctly incongruous meanings that cannot be reconciled logically, but only through laughter. This condition is also created when the audience has the freedom to interpret ambiguous text to produce a similar incongruity. Eco describes this semiotic process: “On the one hand the addressee
seeks to draw excitement from the ambiguity of the message and to fill out an ambiguous
text with suitable codes; on the other, he is induced by contextual relationships to see the
message exactly as it was intended, in an act of fidelity to the author and to the historical
environment in which the message was emitted” (Theory 276). In the case of Monty
Python and the Holy Grail, the codes or signs have acquired signification from traditions
dating from medieval times and representations of those signs in popular culture. There is
a conflict between the natural tendency to read the signs in a standard fashion, as dictated
by serious texts, and to read the signs according to the transformed meaning of the
symbols in Monty Python’s new Arthurian world.

Monty Python’s choice of the Middle Ages is indeed appropriate for the period of the film’s release. Matthews states,

The earliest stories of the Grail came into being during a time of
extraordinary flux, when much of the western world was undergoing a
simultaneous cultural renaissance combined with a period of spiritual re-
definition. It is my belief that one of the reasons why the Grail has become
such an important symbol for our own time is because we are also going
through a similar period of cultural upheaval and spiritual re-assessment.

(Sources 10)

While Monty Python is working in this same period of upheaval, they use the Grail and
other medieval symbols in a very different way by pointing out the inherent arbitrariness of
these symbols. Huizinga describes one of the problems of the medieval use of symbols:
“From the causal point of view, symbolism appears as a sort of short-circuit of thought.
Instead of looking for the relation between two things by following the hidden detours of their causal connections, thought makes a leap and discovers their relation, not in a connection of cause or effects, but in a connection of signification or finality” (Waning 184). In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, these symbolic connections are exposed as arbitrary assumptions. An episode where Lancelot’s servant Concorde is hit with an arrow with an attached message is indicative of the mind set that Huizinga describes: “Individual and social life, in all their manifestations, are imbued with the conceptions of faith. There is not an object nor an action, however trivial, that is not constantly correlated with Christ or salvation” (Waning 136). When Lancelot reads the note describing what he thinks is a cry for rescue by a damsel in distress, he is ecstatic. Lancelot says: “At last a call . . . a cry of distress! This could be the sign that leads us to the Holy Grail!” Every little thing in this medieval world, no matter how ostensibly irrelevant, is considered as a sign that leads to the fulfillment of the quest: the Holy Grail.

One of the first signs that the Monty Python troupe presents in the film, shows how completely they can undermine even the most closely related signifier-signified relations. The film starts with the sound of horses’ hooves beating on the soundtrack. Arthur and his servant Patsy rise above the horizon only to reveal that they are not riding horses, but making the sound of hooves by banging the empty halves of coconuts together. This semiotic undermining of meaning occurs because the audience hears and recognizes the sound of hooves as logical and natural in the medieval context established in the film. Coconuts are completely inappropriate for the context. This is pointed out in the film by the guards on the castle wall who question the presence of coconuts (which are
native to tropical climates) in the temperate climate of England. This is an embodiment of
Schopenhauer’s description of the conflict between the conceived and the perceived.
Because both signifiers (horses’ hooves and coconut shells), make the same signified
sound, these two elements are incongruously juxtaposed. For the audience, this is a
tekmerion, a sure index, and could not logically be considered polysemous. The audience
realizes that their preconceptions that the sound could only represent horses’ hooves is
challenged by the realization that the sound is made with coconuts.

This scene is also crucial for establishing the comic environment and tone of the
film. Although the film is often excessively violent and disgustingly realistic, it is still
viewed as comic because of the isotopy which it establishes right from the beginning.
Terry Gilliam stated: “It makes a wonderful leap because with that opening shot you
accept the kind of lunatic logic that’s there. Arthur is incredibly serious, never a blink, and
then in the background you’ve got all this stuff going on” (qtd. in Chapman et al.,
*Autobiography* 239). As an interesting side note, the Python troupe originally were going
to use horses, but due to budget constraints, they were unable to afford them. Gilliam
states of this occasion: “[. . .] we wanted to make an epic, except we didn’t have the
money to do it properly. I think the restrictions made the film better, because if we’d had
the money for real horses there would have been no coconut shells, which are far funnier.
So we were saved by poverty from the mediocrity to which we aspired” (58-9).

Another interesting episode of the film that highlights how Monty Python
undermines the importance of signs to the medieval mind occurs when King Arthur asks
some peasants who the lord of the nearby castle is. He is shocked to hear that there is no
lord and that the peasants are living in a progressive pseudo-Marxist commune. Arthur reveals to the peasants that he is their king. One of the peasants asks Arthur how he became king since she never voted for him. Arthur’s reply indicates that he is well within the medieval frame of reference in regards to signs: “The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in purest shimmering samite, held Excalibur aloft from the bosom of the water to signify that by Divine Providence . . . I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur . . . that is why I am your King” (Chapman et al., Grail 10). Dennis, the other peasant, however responds in a way that completely undermines the medieval reliance on signs as the basis of divine rule. He states, “Look, strange women lying on their backs in ponds handing over swords . . . that’s no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses not from some farcical aquatic ceremony” (Chapman et al., Grail 10). He questions the very basis for monarchies and the religious ideology that was often used, especially in the Middle Ages, to justify them. The contempt of the modern mind for placing value on such a sign is evident in Dennis’ next statement: “I mean, if I went round saying I was an Emperor because some moistened bint had lobbed a scimitar at me, people would put me away” (Chapman et al., Grail 10). He equates a belief in this kind of sign or signifying event with insanity, and indeed, from a modern perspective the signifying system of the Middle Ages does not make sense. This episode is, as Larsen points out, “a direct assault on the medieval conception of their king’s divinity and fair-mindedness” (95).

The witch trial in Monty Python and the Holy Grail is also interesting for how it portrays and undermines yet another sign system in the medieval world. A group of villagers bring a woman who they say is a witch to be judged by Sir Bedevere. Bedevere
asks the villagers how they know that she is a witch. They respond with a series of signifying elements proving, as they suppose, that she is a witch. The reasons they present include: she looks like one, she is dressed like one, she has a wart, a long nose (which is actually a carrot that the villagers attached to her nose), and because she turned one of the villagers into a newt. None of these signs are particularly convincing to Sir Bedevere, so he proposes a more scientific method for determining if she is a witch. Through an elaborate series of faulty logic, he explains to the villagers an actual medieval practice of determining if the woman is a witch. Salzman describes this practice: “In the ordeal by water the accused was stripped of his clothes, bound and cast into a pool, over which a priest had recited a prayer that if he were innocent the water would receive him, but if guilty it would reject him; if he sank he was dragged ashore and released, but if he floated his guilt was considered proved” (223). Bedevere then takes this idea one step further and concludes that since ducks also float on water, if she weighs the same as a duck, she is made of wood (which also floats), and therefore a witch. Bedevere is Monty Python’s satirical embodiment of the problems inherent in medieval science. At other times he explains that sheep’s bladders can prevent earthquakes and that the Earth is banana-shaped. By giving these ideas a pseudo-scientific basis, Monty Python is not only poking fun at the past belief in signs, but also at the science and logic of the modern period and pointing out the limitations of each.

One of the clear examples of how Monty Python undermines the sign systems of the Middle Ages is through the animations of Terry Gilliam. The animations in Monty Python had always been a part of the television show and were emblematic of their visual
style. Gilliam has long had a fascination for medieval images and the grotesque (Thompson 8), and the animated sequences of Monty Python and the Holy Grail are not unusual in his body of work. Gilliam takes the tradition of satire in the margins of medieval manuscripts and brings it to the medium of film. It is important to note that the animation sequences in the film are used almost exclusively as transitional elements between scenes. Thus, the drawings still act as a marginal type of commentary or gloss on the main action of the text of the film. Gilliam continues the crudity of the tradition by exhibiting a fascination with violence and the buttocks. While Gilliam’s work is not a new reassignment of the semiotic meaning of marginal illustrations, which have precedent in medieval manuscripts, the irreverent tradition is not well known by the general populace and, therefore, must have appeared radically new to the majority of the viewing audience.

The traditional understanding of illuminated manuscripts focuses on their religious nature, so the reassignment of those symbolic representations as satiric commentary produces a shocking incongruity.

Monty Python’s look at heraldry and heraldic practices also provides an interesting commentary on that signifying practice. According to Salzman: “Heraldry, the science of armorial bearings, came into prominence with the appearance of a type of helm which concealed much of the face, in the twelfth century” (199). This practice became more important than its purely practical origins would require. “It is clear that a man’s heraldic device was seen in the medieval period as a simple sign for the man himself. As such it was given a great deal of importance and treated with much more attention than any practical purpose would warrant” (Arthur 48). Most of the knights in Monty Python and
the Holy Grail have primarily conventional examples of heraldic devices on their shields. Arthur, for instance, has a sun, Bedevere uses a tree, Lancelot a griffin, and Galahad a cross. Sir Robin however, who is well known for his cowardice, proudly sports the sign of a chicken on his shield and his clothing. On one level, this undermines the heraldic signifying system, by portraying a cowardly image as a knight’s emblem. On another level, it is reinforcing the system by emphasizing how the emblem is supposed to represent the character of the knight. Thus the shield is bisociated between two different and conflicting isotopies working independently in each, but is incongruous when seen as a whole.

Relics in the Middle Ages were other symbols of great importance. They were believed to posses special characteristics and powers because of their relationship with holy figures in Christian history and pointed to those figures and their miraculous deeds. Dean states, “The Middle Ages was an era devoted to religious relics. [. . .] it is clear that the people of the Middle Ages venerated relics of all kinds and wanted to own them” (50). Obviously, the Grail itself is one of the relics that Monty Python undermines the significance of. The Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch is another. This is a relic that Brother Maynard, a member of the clergy, carries, and its use is proscribed in The Book of Armaments (a Biblical-style text from which he reads). By turning a holy relic into a weapon, Monty Python not only undermines the sacred symbols associated with relics, but comments on the modern era and the way that such weapons are revered for their destructive capabilities. By providing a new signifying association, they create a satirical commentary and humorous incongruity.
One scene in the film that provides an interesting example of how the sign-signifier relationship can be undermined is in the taunting scene where the French knight calls Arthur and his group “silly English knights.” He pronounces “knights” as “kahnn-niggits” emphasizes the typically silent “k” at the beginning. At face value, what is happening is that he is pronouncing a letter that does, in fact, have more than one pronunciation. The correct pronunciation of a letter that can have multiple pronunciations is typically disambiguated by context. This is something that the French knight cannot do. On that level, it allows the audience to laugh at the foreigner who does not have the ability to correctly pronounce English (certainly, the English and the French have a long enough history of trading insults). It also creates an incongruity between the expected “correct” pronunciation and the actual one. On a deeper level however, Monty Python is pointing out an interesting semiotic phenomenon that allows for ambiguity, imbedded in language itself.

Although the alphabet principle implies establishing a fixed correspondence between a character and a sound, most alphabetically written languages are highly unphonetic, largely because the system of writing remains static while the spoken language evolves. The spelling of the English words knight, knave, knot, for instance, reflects the pronunciation of an earlier period of the language, when the initial k was pronounced as it continues to be in German (Knopf “head”), a sister language of English. (Danesi 78) Whether intentional or not, Monty Python’s unusual pronunciation of this word plays with meaning as a historical phenomenon and illustrates one of the interesting aspects of linguistic ambiguity.
Another interesting scene in the film that portrays the semiotic reassignment of a medieval symbol is found in the section of the film called “The Tale of Sir Galahad.” Galahad was one of the most important knights in Arthurian Legend and one of the few who actually found the Grail. Galahad, as he is approaching a castle, sees a vision of the Grail in the sky above its parapets. This is in keeping with the legendary tradition that the Grail was known to appear floating in the air as a vision from time to time (Lampo 118). Galahad, being an embodiment of the medieval consciousness of the period, immediately understands its significance. “The naive religious conscience of the multitude had no need of intellectual proofs in matters of faith. The mere presence of a visible image of things holy sufficed to establish their truth” (Huizinga, Waning 148). Similarly, when Galahad enters the castle and talks to its caretaker, the beautiful Zoot, he insists that he knows that the Grail is in the castle. Galahad, the Chaste, maintains his purity in the face of temptations from the castle’s beautiful, young female inhabitants and stays true to his quest to find the Grail until he makes a startling discovery: nothing in the castle signifies what he thinks it does. He runs into the woman, who he thinks is Zoot, who, in the film, is actually Zoot’s identical twin sister, Dingo. Both characters are signified by the same actress, Carol Cleveland. The incongruity of the situation is apparent. Two different characters are played by the same actress for the comic incongruity that it creates. In addition, he learns from Dingo that the vision he saw in the sky above the castle was actually a grail-shaped beacon. The highest moment of religious vision was not actually a sign from God, but was a phenomenally coincidental accident. Disillusioned and stymied
in his quest for the Grail, Galahad almost gives in to the temptations of the beautiful young
women only to be saved at the last minute by Lancelot, who he accuses of being gay.

**Comedy of the Cinema**

In addition to undermining the sign systems of the Middle Ages, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* also creates comedy by playing with filmic construction and by utilizing
and undermining the sign system created by and intrinsic to film. Monty Python
accomplishes this by exploiting, parodying, and undermining the significance of
conventional elements of film. This is evident right from the beginning of the film. The
credits start out in a conventional fashion, but shortly after they have begun, a pseudo-
Swedish series of subtitle appears. While this is unusual in itself, the Swedish translation
(which uses Nordic letters, but is similar enough to English to be comprehensible) begins
to diverge from the English titles. There is eventually a complete separation between the
credits and the subtitles whereupon an authorial voice, in the form of on-screen titles, says
that those responsible for the credits have been fired. The whole time the music has been
standard fare for a medieval epic film. The credits change, and this time there are no more subtitles. The credits themselves, however, have been undermined with unusual names
and credit descriptions such as “Moose Trained by.” The music has become more calm
and pastoral. The unusual credits eventually crowd out the real credits and the credit
sequence once again comes to a screeching halt. At this point, the titles inform us that
more firings have occurred and the credits have now been redone in a completely different
fashion. The music is now a Mexican mariachi type piece and all pretense at normality has
been abandoned with credits going to people such as “‘Ralph’ the Wonder Llama.” By
undermining this standard cinematic signifying system Monty Python creates comedy. The abrupt changes in the musical soundtrack create humorous incongruities as well because we are accustomed to music setting a standard tone for a film. Because of the schizophrenic nature of the music, we are not allowed to formulate any presumptions about the tone of the movie except that it is unusual and comic in nature.

Music was very important to Monty Python during the editing process. Eric Idle stated of the use of the music in the film: “Then there was the realisation that you can just pull the soundtrack off and put on a sort of classic bad Hollywood soundtrack–it’s all pre-recorded music on *Grail* and that really helped it, because it lifted it into the area of swashbuckling parody. It’s a parody soundtrack that gives the parody film a base, so we can recognise subconsciously what’s going on, and that really helped.” (Chapman et al., *Autobiography* 264). As we discussed in chapter two, a knowledge of the parodied text is necessary to understand how the parody is functioning. In this case, the music typical of a the standard Hollywood soundtrack is so well known that it has become part of the general encyclopedic knowledge of the populace and, therefore, it is easy to recognize, at least subconsciously, the parody.

The film also uses music to heighten contrasts between different shots in the film. A clear example of this is when King Arthur and Sir Bedevere are riding through the forest approaching a battle in which the Black Knight is engaged. In the scenes with Arthur, there is the standard sort of heroic swashbuckling music playing, but when the film cuts to the Black Knight, the music cuts out. This has a jarring effect that is produced between the juxtaposition of two very different sound patterns: the heroic music on one
hand and the sounds of steel clanging and the grunts of men fighting on the other. This incongruity is enhanced by the visual difference between the two shots. The shots with Arthur are picturesque medium long shots with the light shining in ethereal streaks through the leaves of the trees to the forest floor. The shots with the Black Knight are close-up shots of the fighting with only parts of the combatants’ bodies visible. These shots emphasize the wild, dynamic movements of the battle and heighten the tension, by not allowing the audience to see enough of the battle to get a clear visual understanding of the scene. The incongruity between the two very different types of shots in this cross-cutting editorial montage, builds up the tension and incongruity leading up to the encounter between the two groups.

The film also uses cinema’s ability to show a variety of different types of shots to create comic surprise and incongruity. In one scene, we see a close-up of a monk’s face singing his “Pie Jesu” in a serious fashion. As soon as he finishes the phrase, he hits himself in the forehead with a wooden paddle. Because of the close-up view of the frame, we do not see the paddle and so it comes as a complete surprise, allowing for more potential humor in the incongruity. Of course, there is also a satiric element here regarding the practice of self-mortification, but the immediate comic effect is created by the carefully controlled withholding of visual information to create a surprising incongruity.

Another example of how the film uses the qualities of cinematic construction to create comedy takes place in the Camelot scene. This is a big song and dance number with numerous knights and servants filling the court at Camelot. It is busy, loud, and
exciting. At one point, the film cuts to a shot of a man chained to the wall who claps his hands in time to the beat. The music is almost inaudible in this scene, because it presumably takes place in a dungeon far from the celebration. The film then cuts back to the song and dance number never to return to the prisoner. The abruptness of the cut and the unusual behavior of the man in his situation again create comedy through this surprising incongruity. While the song is silly in itself, it does form a coherent isotopy of a song and dance number which is interrupted and subverted by this abrupt cut to the man in the dungeon.

Monty Python also plays with the ability to infinitely reproduce shots and performances without variation. In the scene where Sir Lancelot charges Swamp Castle, we see, from the point of view of the castle guards, Lancelot running towards them from far across the field. The film cuts back to the guards watching and then back to Lancelot. The traditional logical and filmic expectation would be that Lancelot would be visually closer to the guards. Instead, we see Lancelot in the exact same clip of film, visually never getting any closer to the castle. This is repeated several times before, unexpectedly, Lancelot is upon the guards and attacks them. Because Lancelot does actually get closer to the castle, but visually does not progress as he logically should, we have an incongruity created by the editing of the film. This is an incongruity that cannot be logically resolved within the world of the film or by comparison to conventional visual perception. Terry Gilliam said that one of the things that he likes best about the film is exactly this quality of playing with the cinematic form (Chapman et al., Autobiography 266).

Although the film creates numerous such incongruities, we will examine just two
more towards the end of the film. One of these incongruities is the intermission. This is incongruous on several levels. First, although the intermission is a conventionalized cinematic technique, it was not in common use at the time that Monty Python and the Holy Grail was produced. It is appropriate for the film in that intermissions were often used for epic films such as Ben Hur and Spartacus, a tradition that Monty Python and the Holy Grail parodically ties itself into. The reason for including an intermission, however, was that these epic films were typically so long that the filmmakers need to provide a break for the audience. In the case of Monty Python and the Holy Grail, the film is only ninety minutes long and does not need an intermission for this purpose. It is included only to create a humorous incongruity. The intermission also has another problem.

Conventionally, the intermission would come in the middle of the film so that neither section on either side of the intermission was too long. In a three hour film, this would come somewhere around ninety minutes into the film. The intermission in Monty Python and the Holy Grail comes just a couple of minutes from the end. In that sense, it is an unconventional spot, creating a incongruity with the conventional location. It is also nearly ninety minutes into the film, however, which would make it adhere to the conventional chronological location of the intermission. In this sense, it is paradoxical, both belonging and not belonging in the narrative at this point.

The final scene of the film also proves to be unconventional. Instead of Arthur finishing his quest by having his army attack the castle, he is arrested by modern day police. In addition to the incongruous anachronism that this creates, it also creates an incongruity at the level of narrative structure. Most epic films clearly follow an
Aristotelian structure with a clear conclusion and resolution at the end. Not only does this film deny the audience this resolution, it also completely denies the successful completion of the grail quest that is part of the Arthurian legend, subverting that semiotic system as well. The final shot of the film undermines one final semiotic system, that of the observatory nature of narrative cinema. This convention would have the viewers accept that they are merely observing a story taking place before them. The final scene of the film has a police officer going up to the cameraman (whose presence is never acknowledged within this semiotic system) and breaking the camera, thus ending the film. This behavior on the part of the police man is not uncommon to see in television or documentary film, thus juxtaposing this isotopy with the internally contained narrative of the film, which does not, until this point, acknowledge the camera.

Monty Python and the Holy Grail uses this reassignment of semiotic meaning to satirize a variety of institutions from the Middle Ages to the present day. By undermining and redefining the conventional meaning of these signs, Monty Python is able to produce an incongruity that becomes comical. The sheer incompatibility of the multiply-signified meanings is logically irreconcilable and produces laughter. The ideas thus undermined are shown in a parodic and satiric light that exposes them to a critique that questions the very basis of their existence and meaning. In a world where all the signs become unfixed from their traditional meanings, nothing is certain. Even the most basic signs can become disassociated from their meanings. Arthur, for example, has trouble with simple signifiers. Even signs with very specific associations such as numbers cause problems for him. He is continually confusing “three” with “five” even though these are basic semiotic concepts.
Every sign’s meaning is up for grabs in Monty Python’s world. In the film, scene twenty-four is so important that it is given its own illuminated title stating “Scene 24” and is also introduced as “scene twenty-four” by the narrator. The old man in this scene, who later returns as the keeper of the bridge of death, is referred to by Arthur as “The old man from scene twenty-four.” It is not surprising that a group of comedians who have systematically undermined the symbolic meaning of much of the Middle Ages and the present are able to show one more time how unimportant they consider the fixed meaning of these signs to be. In the script for *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, the scene referred to as scene twenty-four is actually scene sixteen.
“It is the most poetic thing. In laughter there is joy and beauty: it has always been the thing that people love most. Laughter is a thing for which there is no explanation [. . .].”

-Roberto Benigni (qtd. in Borsatti 5)

Chapter 7: Dangerous Games - Roberto Benigni’s La Vita É Bella or the Aesthetics of Comedy and Tragedy Revisited

Despite a long and successful career as an actor, writer, and director in his native Italy (and some less successful acting forays into American cinema), it is only since the 1997 release of his La Vita É Bella (Life is Beautiful) that Roberto Benigni has gained real international attention. The critical acclaim and international awards that he received for that film brought him international scrutiny and the inevitable swarm of critics that acclaim attracts. The critics are sharply divided on Roberto Benigni, some praising him as a deft and sensitive genius and clown, and others condemning him as an inept and inadequate imposter and buffoon. A large part of controversy over this film stems from the juxtaposition of two radically opposed sign systems: tragedy and comedy. Umberto Eco argues that psychological responses are a function of contradictions within a codified system. He states, “Thus a theory of the tragic and the comic could rely on a theory of codes: tragic and comic feelings have semiotical roots” (Theory 143). This chapter accepts this idea and explores how Benigni is able to interweave these two systems to create both comedy and tragedy and explore why this combination is so provocative. A return to the origins of tragedy and comedy and a discussion of their roles in the modern world finishes this chapter.
Italian Comic Origins

To begin our study of Roberto Benigni and how he creates comedy and tragedy in *Life is Beautiful*, it is useful to provide some historical context about Italian comic film and the tradition from which he is coming. Italy has a long tradition of comedy, comic personalities, mimes, and is even responsible for the origin of the clown (Pantieri 18). As far back as ancient Rome, comedy played an important role in society in the form of comic dramas originally taken from Greek New Comedy. Another important influence on modern Italian comedy is the Commedia dell’Arte.

The Commedia dell’Arte was a theatrical form that utilized a variety of stock characters, including Harlequin, the original character on whom the clown is based (Pantieri 18). Although it is hard to assign fixed dates on the development of Commedia dell’Arte, the form essentially developed in the sixteenth century in northern Italy and remained popular for approximately 200 years (Danesi 169). Commedia dell’Arte included stock characters and performances were largely unscripted, relying on predefined relationships between the characters. A performance often included set comic gestures and situations, but was, nevertheless, a theatrical form that required considerable ability on the part of the actors to ad-lib and carry out comic business. It is largely out of this tradition that early Italian comedians developed their comic style. Landy suggests that the influences of Commedia dell’Arte led to a cinematic style that was “largely concerned with broad character types rather than sharply individual psychological portraits” (Landy, *Film* 115). Palmieri describes how some of these early films were similar to the Commedia dell’Arte:
Against cardboard sets actors gesticulated wildly to express their meaning for the benefit of even the most backward members of any audience. [...]

In the comedies, the players frisked and bounced like the harlequins in the Commedia dell’Arte, or like clowns in the circus. People jumped from windows and furniture flew through the air. Mayhem and physical violence were rife and, though the first custard pie was not to be thrown for a considerable time yet, already the comic film had sensed its function, to bring the ridiculous into sharp relief by the speed of its action, by violence, grotesquerie, slapstick, ‘gags’—the whole marvelous array of tricks which the cinematograph permitted. (20)

Although the Commedia dell’Arte created verbal as well as visual humor, it was the physicality of the tradition that was particularly suited to silent film comedy. Pantieri argues that although early film comedy developed as its own tradition, it is important to recognize that it cannot be completely separated in terms of its principles, forms, and techniques from its roots in Commedia dell’Arte, the circus, and the music-hall (188-190).

**Italian Film Comedy**

Early Italian comedy, starting in the silent era and then moving into sound, included a mixture of Italian and French comics who used nicknames such as Coco, Cretinetti, Robinet, Totò, Kri-Kri, and Polidor. Early film comedies were cinematic in nature emphasizing “gags, tricks, absurd adventures and sorcery” (Palmieri 30) even though some actors like Totò were equally comfortable with both visual and verbal comedy. “Totò did not disappear in a cloud of puns, he was a physical presence. His
bizarre clowning was the centre of the action and swamped the screen. He made full use of both his loose, rubbery body and a lightening-fast ability to switch moods from upset scepticism to naive enthusiasm and from affronted sulking to cheerful keeness” (Sorlin 112). Totò also brought in the traditions of Neopolitan street theater and puppet shows into his comedy (Sorlin 112).

During the Fascist era, the government was very interested in film, even comic film. It is said that Mussolini enjoyed Laurel and Hardy films and musicals (Buss 28). During the Fascist era, however, a domestic type of comedy, called a white telephone comedy, held sway. White telephone comedies were the state sanctioned and preferred type of comic entertainment during the Fascist era. They received the title “white telephone” because they usually were about upper-class characters who lived in fancy homes with white telephones. These comedies were generally considered escapist in nature, tended to reinforce social values, typically did not address serious issues, and almost always had a happy ending (Buss 29-32). While Landy argues that the comedies during this period were more complex and diverse than is generally admitted (Folklore 46), they did not typically treat the interaction between the comic and the tragic that is the focus of this chapter. Some directors such as Alessandro Blasetti and Mario Camerini managed to maintain fairly successful careers before, during, and after Fascism and were able to provide a critical or ironic view of society that would influence later neorealist directors such as Vittorio de Sica and Roberto Rossellini (Bondanella 16-8). De Sica who had a successful career as a comic actor carried some of that comic spirit into his directorial work. Bondanella argues that “Even the most serious of neorealist classics
were never totally devoid of humor or comic episodes [. . .]” (86). He cites as an example Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City* which deals with the Nazi occupation and underground movement in Rome during World War II. In one scene, Don Pietro the priest has come ostensibly to administer last rites to a dying man, but is really there to help conceal weapons for the resistance movement. In a slapstick comedy scene, he eventually has to knock the old man unconscious with a frying pan in order to conceal the weapons from the Germans who are searching the building. Immediately after this scene however, the tone “shifts to the darkest of tragedy” (Bondanella 40) when Pina, one of the female leads, is senselessly slaughtered by a German machine gun.

Italian film has often dealt with serious subjects in a comic vein. Following the heyday of neorealism, filmmakers continued to explore serious ideas often through the use of comedy. “The ethical and investigative spirit of neorealism was not abandoned; rather, there was a greater exploration of the conditions and nature of realism in more complex and philosophic terms, often in the vein of comedy and satire” (Landy, *Film* 111). As Landy suggests, these comedies are not mere escapism, but approaches to dealing with serious themes in a comedic way. Buss argues, “So the comedies of the post-war period are not mere farce. In fact, it is characteristic of Italian comedy that its subjects are often decidedly unfunny (war, especially; crime; seduction and adultery; even rape) and that it lurches often from farce to tragedy” (Buss xii). Several Italian comedies in the post war period look at very serious, even tragic, topics in a comic light. Films such as *Vivere in Pace* (*To Live in Peace*, 1946), *La Grande Guerra*, (*The Great War*, 1959), and *Tutti a Casa* (*Everybody Home*, 1960) deal with both the tragic and the comic in the setting of the
Second World War. *Divorzio all'Italiana* (*Divorce Italian Style*, 1961) deals with a husband who murders his wife so that he can remarry because divorce was not possible in Italy. All through the film this serious subject is treated in a comic manner. Lina Wertmuller’s *Pasqualino Settebellezze* (*Seven Beauties*, 1975) perhaps most closely foreshadows the combination of comedy and tragedy that would appear in Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful*. *Seven Beauties*, in telling the story of Pasqualino, mixes comedy with murder, crime, and the horrors of a German concentration camp. Bondanella said of the film, “Wertmuller realized that only with this juxtaposition of moods could she move her viewer to react most fully to the horror of the state to which Pasqualino would eventually be reduced” (Bondanella 363). Through the opposition of comedy and tragedy, we can see not only the incongruities in life, but the congruities between comedy and tragedy and begin to see how closely related the two forms are.

Let us return briefly to the argument in the first chapter that comedy was born out of tragedy and that tragedy must establish the rules and conventions that comedy will then mock and overturn. This pattern holds true in cinema as well. Buss states, “The events and characters of cinema repeat themselves, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” (ix). A farcical approach does not necessitate that the material be without a serious purpose or require that it cannot make a serious commentary. In speaking about the post-war Italian comedies, Landy suggests that these films reveal “that Fascism and war remain central to Italian culture and politics, and that film comedy remains a dominant form for rethinking the past” (*Film* 120). Comedy is not a means of escaping the horrors of reality, but a provocative and powerful way of addressing them.
In Italian cinema, comedies are almost always more popular than dramatic works (Bondanella 412). In spite of this, and the mature and insightful way that Italian comedy has dealt with serious issues, relatively little comedy has been exported from Italy. Pantieri argues that even though much of Italian comedy is realistic, having a popular origin, it does not export well because it appeals to an Italian reality (22). Sorlin suggests that Italian comedy “depended mostly on personal performances which were not easily appreciated outside the cultural context in which they were produced” (111). Both of these comments refer to the importance of having an adequate sign competence to understand and appreciate the nuances of the comedy. Without understanding Italian culture and language, much of Italian comedy becomes problematic for outsiders. While this is a major factor in the limited international release of Italian comedy, perhaps the other major reason is “Comedy was immensely [sic] appreciated but never taken seriously” (Sorlin 111). Despite the complex way that comedy deals with serious issues, it rarely receives critical acclaim. In 1997, Roberto Benigni released *Life is Beautiful*, a film which called that practice into question.

**The Films of Roberto Benigni**

Roberto Benigni was born in Misericordia, Arezzo, Italy on October 27, 1952. He grew up near the textile city of Prato and lived in a house devoid of water and electricity with his parents and three older sisters (Jewel 102). It was here that Benigni got his first exposure to film. “As a child, he would sneak into drive-ins with his siblings to watch movies” (“Life is Beautiful - Biography,” par. 1). This was when Benigni first discovered Charlie Chaplin, who would become one of his major influences. In fact, Benigni has
stated, “My biggest influence was Charlie Chaplin. [. . .]  When I discovered Charlie Chaplin, I saw Charlie Chaplin a hundred times” (Making).  Chaplin’s influence is easily visible in much of Benigni’s contemporary work.  Benigni also cites being influenced by Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, and Totó (Borsatti 5-6).

Benigni’s education seems somewhat unusual in light of his eventual choice of occupations.  He started his formal education by studying to be a priest in Florence.  He studied there until a flood damaged the seminary in 1966, and then decided not to return (Jewel 104).  Following his unsuccessful attempt at the priesthood, he enrolled in and received his degree from the Economy Institute at Prato (Borsatti 14-15).  When he was not in class or studying, he would use his time to learn about theater (Jewel 104).  In 1972, when he was twenty, he went to Rome where he began to earn a reputation as a stand-up comic.  After five years of doing stand-up comedy and following several television appearances, he finally broke into film by landing a part in the 1977 film, *Berlinguer Ti Voglio Bene* (Socci 107).  Benigni quickly gained attention as a comedian, and his first role was soon followed by parts in several other comedy films.  In addition to his comic dialogue, Benigni was known for his unusual movement and gesture (Sorlin 149).

Benigni got a chance to direct his first film, *Tu Mi Turbi*, in 1983.  *Tu Mi Turbi*, based on a collection of four of Benigni’s comic sketches, was remarkable in Benigni’s life not only because he wrote, directed, and acted in the film, but also because it marked the first time he worked with his future wife, Nicoletta Braschi (Borsatti 35).  In this film we see some hints at Benigni’s interest in the relationship between comedy and tragedy.
Although the film is comic, one section almost ends tragically before Benigni’s character wakes up to reveal that it was all a dream (Socci 109). He followed this with his 1985 film, *Non ci Resta Che Piangere*, which followed the exploits of two modern Italians lost in fifteenth century Italy. The film is primarily comic, but it does have its moments that are more exemplary of pathos, such as the realization at the end of the movie that the two will never return to their own time. The title of the film, which translates as “nothing left to do but cry,” also hints at the mixed emotional message of the film.

Roberto Benigni continued on to become a very successful comedian and director in his native Italy. He helped form a generation of comic filmmakers that Marlia describes as one that produces a very personal cinema that revolves around the filmmaker’s own experiences, memories, and personal fantasies (59). The year 1988 marked Benigni’s first major attempt to enter international cinema, with the film *Il Piccolo Diavolo* or *The Little Devil*. The film is about a priest (played by American actor, Walter Matthau) who, through an unsuccessful exorcism, gains the companionship of a mischievous devil, played by Benigni. The movie was a very intentional attempt to enter the American market “by shooting [the] film in English and pairing Benigni with Walter Matthau” (Young, “Borders” 69). Even though, at the time, the film became the highest-grossing Italian film, it was never released in the United States (Socci 107).

Benigni’s next film, *Johnny Stecchino*, about a Sicilian gangster and his innocent double, broke his old box office record only a short time after it was released in 1991 (Young, “Borders” 65). In this film, Benigni not only has a double role as writer and director, but also a double role as the two lead characters. One of the characters is a
mostly harmless bus driver of teenagers with Down’s Syndrome, named Dante, and the other is a notorious gangster, Johnny Stecchino. Nicoletta Braschi again plays the lead female who recognizes Dante as her husband, Johnny’s, double. Johnny is in hiding from some other gangsters he sold out to the authorities. Johnny and his wife plan to use Dante as a decoy so that the other gangsters will kill Dante in Johnny’s place. A series of comic mishaps get Dante in and out of trouble with the gangsters and the authorities in this fast paced and essentially light-hearted comedy. It is interesting to note, however, that Benigni does introduce some more serious elements into his comedy. He deals with the mafia, drug use, murder, betrayal and corruption within the context of his comedy, and not always with a completely comic tone. Johnny is actually betrayed by his wife to his enemies and is murdered near the end of the film. Another interesting addition to the film that illustrates its complexity and willingness to treat serious issues is its “natural, uncondescending presentation of youngsters with Down’s Syndrome” (Young, “Stecchino” 54). Although the film does have a primarily comic tone that ranges from clever wordplay to slapstick clowning, it does foreshadow some of the more serious issues that Benigni will confront in Life is Beautiful. Here Benigni shows that he is willing to apply comedy to some subjects that have not traditionally fallen within the comic realm.

Benigni’s next attempt to break into the international film market was not until 1993, when he played the lead in Blake Edward’s Son of the Pink Panther. The film did not do well critically or commercially. He followed up this foray into American cinema with an Italian comedy, Il Mostro or The Monster in 1994. Benigni wrote, produced, directed, and starred in this film. The film was “the all time box office champion in Italy,
surpassing the previous champ, *Johnny Stecchino*” (McCoy, par. 1). This film also deals with an unusual comic premise. This time Benigni’s character, a loveable small-time thief and swindler, is mistaken for a serial murderer and rapist. The film centers around the police placing a beautiful and seductive undercover police woman (Braschi again) in his home so that he will reveal his homicidal and rapist tendencies. The seriousness of the comic premise is, again, interesting in that it reveals how Benigni has systematically trained his audiences to accept comedy that deals with non-traditional themes.

Some of Benigni’s influences can help explain the path that his comedic style has taken. As Benigni has stated several times, Charlie Chaplin was one of his biggest inspirations. It seems that Chaplin influenced not only his acting, but his writing and directing as well. Chaplin was well known for his ability to combine comedy with a sense of genuine pathos, a tone that is evident in many of Benigni’s films, especially *Life is Beautiful*. Another one of Benigni’s influences is Dante Alighieri. Not only does one of his characters in *Johnny Stecchino* bear the name Dante, but Benigni “knows by heart the whole [of] Dante’s *Inferno*” (Jewel 104). The scenes in the German concentration camp in *Life is Beautiful* also owe some debt to Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. A third influence on Benigni is his favorite director, Federico Fellini (Jewel 104). Benigni is certainly familiar with Fellini’s works and actually starred in Fellini’s last film, *La Voce della Luna* (1989). From Fellini he has inherited some of his sense of visual richness and comic absurdity.

**Life is Beautiful**

With *Life is Beautiful*, Benigni once again broke all of his old records. Not only
did he win more than seventy international awards with the film, but it became “the top-grossing foreign-language film ever released in the U.S.” (Jewel 101). *Life is Beautiful* is the story of an Italian Jew named Guido (played by Benigni). He moves to the city of Arezzo to start a bookshop and takes a job as a waiter in the hotel where his uncle is head waiter until he can get government approval to open his shop. Structurally, the film is divided into two halves of almost equal duration. During the first half of the film he falls in love with Dora (Nicoletta Braschi) and woos her in the vein of a romantic comedy. She eventually falls in love with him; they get married, and have a son named Giosuè (Giorgio Cantarini). The first section of the film embodies elements of both New and Old Comedy. It is essentially a lighthearted romantic comedy where the boy wins the girl. Mast describes this formulaic structure as “the familiar plot of New Comedy—the young lovers finally wed despite the obstacles (either within themselves or external) to their union” (Mast 4). Some of the obstacles that the couple thought they had overcome do come back to haunt the characters because the film continues past the place where we would find the traditional happy ending. The first half is also filled with Benigni’s physical comedy and politically specific satire, more typical of Old Comedy. The second half of the film takes place near the end of World War II, when the persecution of Jews has become intense. There is an abrupt change in tone as the family is taken from their home and sent to a German work camp. In order to protect his son from the evil around him, Guido decides to convince him that the entire thing is a game and that whoever reaches a thousand points first wins a real tank, Giosuè’s favorite toy. Through the game, Guido is able to convince his son to stay hidden and not complain so that Giosuè can win points
and Guido can save his life. Because of Guido’s quick thinking and sacrifice, he is able to save his son’s life.

The idea for the story of *Life is Beautiful* came from Benigni’s own family. Roberto’s father, Luigi Benigni was imprisoned in a German work camp for more than two years (Tonchi 48). Benigni has said that his father used humor when he told the story to his children. “It was the way he was able to stand it. He was able to tell the story to unite the tragedy and the drama, with a laugh” (qtd. in Jewel 102). Benigni knew that he had something very important and very dangerous when he first thought of the idea for *Life is Beautiful*.

But the idea of *Life is Beautiful* came to me very naturally. I improvised this monologue about a man protecting his son [. . .] telling him, ‘We are in the most wonderful place!’ And my heart started to beat strong–strong. A lot of people told me ‘Please, you are a comedian, don’t do this. You will lose at least 70 percent of your audience!’ But I think an actor has to work in front of his audience, not behind. So at least I was following something I loved so much. (qtd. in Giles and Chang 58)

Benigni knew that his idea would be a delicate one to portray, as did his wife and co-star Nicoletta Braschi who said: “I was kind of scared because touching the concentration camp is so delicate, and I was scared of [the] risk of falling into [. . .] very wrong things” (Making). Even though other Italian films had confronted the war and life under Fascism, Benigni’s comedy is unique in that it raises the issue of the Jew during the Holocaust (Landy, Film 118). With this film, Benigni had set for himself the enormously difficult
task of tastefully setting a comedy in the context of the Holocaust. Benigni knew that there would be comparisons of his film to other films that deal with the Holocaust, most notably Steven Speilberg’s *Schindler’s List*. Benigni has commented on that comparison. “This is very different, this movie. [. . .] *Schindler’s List* is a wonderful movie, but I am a comedian and my way is not to show directly. Just to evoke. This to me was wonderful, the balance to [sic] comedy with the tragedy” (qtd. in Okwu, par. 14).

There was very little middle ground in the critics’ reactions to *Life is Beautiful*; they either loved it or hated it. Critics attacked Benigni on every front: his ideas, his acting, his writing, and even his physical appearance. One reviewer, John Simon, described Benigni as an “inverted-eggplant-headed, chinless wonder [. . .] with his passive-aggressive charmlessness and fish-eyed simletonism” (55). Simon’s reaction to the movie itself was equally as virulent: “[It] is sentimental comedy-drama, totally unbelievable and downright stupid. It intends to be sweet, wistful, and touching, and to excuse itself with not wishing to be taken literally. I say it cannot be taken period, unless you enjoy grossing out on imbecile lies” (54). In his review, Simon goes on to give a plot description in which he confuses the characters and misunderstands the storyline (55). While this sort of ill-informed diatribe can be easily discounted, other critics have brought up cogent and compelling criticisms and concerns that must be recognized. These criticisms come on two major fronts. One is questioning the reality of the depiction of the concentration camp, and the plausibility of a child really surviving and believing that the concentration camp is all just a game. The other, and perhaps more important, point of criticism is the idea itself. Is the Holocaust really an appropriate subject of or backdrop for a comedy?
The question of how realistic the concentration camp is, is a good one. Richard Alleva criticizes the film, especially the time in the concentration camp, as not being realistic:

Do their living quarters evince the filth that breeds despair? No, they are merely bare and dank. Do the guards exhibit that unique Nazi blend of assiduousness and brutality? [. . .] We do see the hero and his fellows huffing and puffing while moving objects like anvils about, but the scenes are milked for Chaplinesque pathos, a quality clearly inadequate given the circumstances. (19)

It is true that Benigni’s concentration camp does not accurately reflect reality. The camp is a set. It is austere but it does not adequately reflect the harsh and dangerous circumstances of a real concentration camp. Like any artistic work, it is an aesthetic representation which can have varying degrees of mimetic representation from realistic to abstract. For Benigni, the camp is a fable, an archetype of prison camps everywhere, one that evokes horrors rather than depicting them in detail (Borsatti 104).

Along these same lines are criticisms that it is improbable that an intelligent young child would be fooled into thinking that the horrible concentration camp was all part of one big game. “Even a small child (if he had been able to survive with his father) would have seen fairly soon that the object of the camp was not to have fun” (Kauffmann 27). “Children are often shrewder than adults, and are not lied to easily” (Davies 1021). Indeed a child would have most likely figured out what was going on, and within the context of the film, Benigni makes no attempt to justify the child’s credulousness.
One critic has argued that “Italian Jewry was spared the worst of genocide. [. . .] This meant that many Italian Jews stayed only a relatively short time in the camps, which enhanced their chances of survival” (Schickel 116-17). Even though this lends some credibility to Benigni’s story, it seems unlikely that Benigni would embrace it as a justification for his movie.

This is not a work of realism. The central story [. . .] has no historical plausibility. But the film is not interested in this kind of realism. [. . .] Indeed the set, costumes and lighting in the second half of the film are all designed to produce a level of abstraction which does nothing to detract from the horror and brutality of the camps. (MacCabe 46)

Benigni has created a fable, not a documentary; they belong to two separate isotopic structures. In order to understand the film and its effectiveness, it is necessary to view it in this way. “It makes a difference to our understanding of how the film works if we situate it not beside Schindler’s List, but in the context of the representational strategies that it openly asserts that it is using” (Kertzer 282-83). This is a tale Benigni has created to tell a story about love, family, and survival. It shows the triumph and the invincibility of the human spirit in the face of indescribable odds. It is not an attempt to accurately re-create a historical event. The real issue is a question of representation, whether the Holocaust can be represented in a comic environment, or, as many critics seem to think, that this is a topic that should be portrayed only in documentary realism. Eugene Ionesco perhaps described the quality in people that leads them to react so negatively to Benigni’s
use of comedy when he said, “We are afraid of too much humor, (and humor is freedom).
We are afraid of freedom of thought [. . .]” (46). This assumption that documentary
realism is the only appropriate form of representation of the Holocaust seems to be at the
heart of most of the criticisms against Life is Beautiful (Kertzer 284).

“How is the Holocaust to be represented artistically? Even to attempt such
representation raises all kinds of uncomfortable questions” (Davies 1021). Addressing
these questions is the very reason why Benigni has been severely criticized. On one level,
Benigni has been criticized for his comic persona in this context. “Benigni has a clearly
defined persona that carries over from film to film. This persona is characterized by
frenetic and spastic physical movement, a range of facial expressions, and rapidly delivered
dialogue” (Landy, Film 119). As a comic actor, Benigni brings with him a set of comic
connotations that prove to be uncomfortable for many viewers. A variety of critics have
commented about this and more specifically about the inappropriateness of Benigni’s
applying comedy to the Holocaust. “A comic movie about the Holocaust strikes me as
unthinkable” (Simon 54). “The sheer whimsy is incongruous given the context” (Mcnab
65). Other critics have made comments along the same lines. They are concerned that the
use of comedy applied to the Holocaust trivializes this atrocious event. Richard Alleva
elaborates on this idea:

I submit that any novelist, playwright, or filmmaker who addresses the
Holocaust must never use it as a sentimental device that courts our tears. [. . .] By collapsing the greatest tragedy of our time into domestic pathos, it
gives the audience permission to laugh and sob and applaud and, quite
possibly, breathe a sigh of relief. The Holocaust? Not so special after all.

One more excuse for a good cry. (18-19).

This comment shows what many critics believe, that the method of artistically or aesthetically representing the Holocaust is a moral issue. “[T]urning even a small corner of this century’s central horror into feel-good popular entertainment is abhorrent. Sentimentality is a kind of fascism too, robbing us of judgement and moral acuity, and it needs to be resisted” (Schickel 117).

Indeed, artistic representation of the Holocaust is a moral issue, one of which Benigni is acutely aware. As is obvious from interviews and careful examination of the film, Benigni does not trivialize the Holocaust. “Benigni never makes light of the Holocaust, only of the fascist logic that goes into it” (Johnson, B., 89). He is not attempting to say that it was anything less than a horrifying and terrible experience. He is saying that even in the face of such dehumanizing and terrifying circumstances, the human soul can survive. Benigni is making a moral statement that love is stronger than fear and death and that even in such amoral times, there are those who possess true nobility and can find joy and comedy in even the most adverse circumstances. It, therefore, seems that any informed criticism of Life is Beautiful ultimately becomes a question of personal opinion and an individual sense of aesthetics rather than a moral critique of Benigni. Because both Benigni and his critics believe essentially the same things about the Holocaust, the question becomes not what they think is wrong with what he said, but with how he said it.

There is, among the critics, a group of supporters of Benigni’s choice to apply
humor to the Holocaust. Surprisingly, some of this support comes from those who did not particularly like his film. “There is no shame in using humor to illuminate human depravity. Benigni’s aspiration is honorable, even if his achievement falls short” (Travers 122). Adrienne Kertzer attempts to put the question of representation of the Holocaust into a larger context. “Although I hesitate to speak about Life is Beautiful, so excessive and misplaced is the outrage that I have heard since its appearance—it is genocide that should provoke our outrage surely, not the aesthetic question of the limitations of comedy” (282). Kertzer is trying to change the perspective on the criteria for which Life is Beautiful is being criticized. Benigni does walk a dangerous line, balancing between the world of tragedy and comedy. “Comedy is a powerful weapon for striking at the wrongs of our society, but it should be used with good sense and with scruple, otherwise it can become a two-edged sword that can destroy those primary values that are indispensable in the life of every human being” (Pantieri 184). Another factor that seems to support the validity of Benigni’s work is the broad support among Jews that the film received (Stock 43). Indeed, despite being criticized of desecration, revisionism, and even of denying the Holocaust, it received a warm welcome when it played at the film festival in Jerusalem (Borsatti 109).

Some critics believe that it is entirely appropriate to use the Holocaust as a topic for comedy and social satire based on the idea that genocide and racial hatred are inherently absurd (Blake 31). By satirizing and mocking the ridiculous hatred, lies, and misconceptions that lead up to the Holocaust, Benigni is actually putting them in their true light. He exposes them for what they are; nothing but indefensible and dangerous actions
and beliefs. There is something cathartic in that exposure. Benigni truly believes in the healing power of laughter. While society should never forget the Holocaust and should struggle so that nothing like it can ever happen again, individuals cannot forever dwell on it, but must eventually return to the business of living life. Benigni spoke about the healing power of laughter when he described his father’s imprisonment in a concentration camp and how this inspired him to create Life is Beautiful: “My father laughed with us, and his nightmares ended, and he freed himself from his fears and came back to life” (Tonchi 48). Benigni, far from trivializing the Holocaust, is utilizing a new semiotic framework from which to examine the lessons that the Holocaust can teach.

**The Tragic Comedy of Life**

An analysis of Life is Beautiful will demonstrate the care with which Benigni has constructed his story and how deftly and subtly he interweaves comedy and tragedy in preparing his audience for the horror that is to come. The film commences with a rather darkly-lit and nebulous scene where Guido is carrying his sleeping son, Giosuè. The audience does not yet know that this scene is set in the concentration camp. Here the film sets up its somber tone and premise through a voice-over of the adult Giosuè. He says, “This is a simple story, but not an easy one to tell. Like a fable, there is sorrow . . . and like a fable, it is full of wonder and happiness” (Life is Beautiful). Through this introduction, Benigni is specifically referencing a world of fable and distancing himself from reality.

The film then turns to the brightly-lit, wide-open Italian countryside. Benigni immediately contradicts the somber tone that was established in the opening scene. Mast
argues that comedians build signs into their works that let the audience know how they should read or respond to the text (9). This is an important part of establishing the mental and emotional climate as was discussed in chapter two. Here we see the Roberto Benigni of comedy involved in a runaway car sequence as the car comically careens down the hills near Arezzo. Guido and his friend Ferruccio end up in a motorcade for the King and are cheered as they go through the welcoming reception of a small town. Guido’s attempts to wave the townspeople out of the way appear to the townspeople to be a Fascist salute and they respond by saluting in return. This is a good example of how a gesture or visual element can create comic incongruity. In this case, the gesture is polysemous. For Guido, it means “get out of the way,” but for the gathered townspeople, it appears to be a salute from an official.

In addition to the comic tone of the scene, we have the presence of Roberto Benigni, who is synonymous with modern Italian comedy, to inform us of the comic nature of the film. “The characters of [a] film rather quickly tell us if the climate is comic. If a familiar comedian plays the central role, we can be almost certain that the climate is comic (unless the filmmaker deliberately plays on our assumptions)” (Mast 9). In this case Benigni, as writer and director, is doing both. He is setting us up for a comic adventure, but he is also playing against our expectations when the film takes a darker, tragic turn.

Throughout the essentially light-hearted, romantic comedy that makes up the first half of the film are inserted increasingly obvious hints of the tragedy and death that totalitarianism will bring to Guido and his family. An early hint occurs as soon as they arrive at the hotel to meet Guido’s uncle, the head waiter. They find that he has been
attacked and ruffed up by some young men, who he appropriately calls “Barbarians.” It is interesting that when Guido asks his uncle why he did not cry out for help his uncle replies, “Silence is the most powerful cry.” While we cannot help but admire this strong-willed man’s courage in the face of adversity, we are reminded of the cost of silence. It is a silence such as this that led to the death of more than six million Jews.

Much of the film in this first section is filled with lighthearted comic moments. Guido gets to perform a typical comic role through comic play and by using conventional tropes such as puncturing overstuffed bureaucrats. These sections are very much in the comic tradition, with the characters that Guido meets filling roles that Frye describes as “snobbish, or priggish characters whose role is that of the refuser of festivity, the killjoy who tries to stop the fun” (176). While much of this section is purely comic and conventional in nature, none of it is wasted; each detail carries some importance or sets something up that will be used later in the film. One such detail is the introduction to Guido of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of the will. Ferruccio tells Guido one night that the way he is able to fall asleep instantly is through exercising his will as he learned from reading Schopenhauer. Guido thinks this is amazing and wants to learn it, but he comically confuses philosophy with some kind of magic trick, waving his fingers and repeating the words of what he wants to have happen. These misreadings of Schopenhauer were included by Benigni, who is well aware of Schopenhauer’s theory of comedy (Borsatti 7), as a kind of ironic homage.

An important scene that highlights the subtlety with which Benigni creates a comic situation, yet simultaneously uses that comedy to comment on a serious topic, is when
Guido impersonates a school inspector from Rome. He does this so that he can meet with Dora, a woman who teaches at the school with whom he has become enamored. Guido comes in to the classroom dressed with the inspector’s tri-colored Italian ribbon over his shoulder and between his legs. This is described by Borsatti as secondarily comic, but primarily an attack on authority (99). Once there, Guido discovers that he is supposed to speak on the newly-published Fascist “Manifesto on Race.” In this scene, “Benigni reduces the myth of Aryan supremacy to its well-deserved absurdity” (Blake 31-32). The principal of the school introduces Guido as the inspector and tells the children that he will be speaking on what the most illuminated Italian scientists have discovered on the issue of race. Guido, in introducing his ad-libbed speech, calls the scientists “racist scientists” instead of “race scientists” in a seemingly innocent mistake. As he continues to use this term, it becomes obvious that Guido has not had a careless slip of the tongue, but is making a commentary. The simple change in endings moves the discourse from a fairly neutral isotopy to one that is highly charged, and this subtle play on words joins the two isotopies and makes a comic incongruity. Guido (a scrawny, dark-skinned, balding brunette) then goes on to show how he is the perfect example of the Aryan race, extolling his own beauty. He points out the signs that define the perfection of his Aryanism. It is very interesting to note that to do this, Guido points out features on his body that are common to all human beings. He first calls attention to his ear and its perfection. He shows of his muscles, the biceps and the triceps, and then goes on to demonstrate what Aryans have better than anyone: the bellybutton. Benigni very cleverly shows the ridiculousness of the argument of Aryan supremacy. Every person who was ever born has
a belly button, independent of their race, color, gender, religion, or philosophy. Benigni is subverting the signifying system that defines the doctrine of Aryan supremacy. Instead of showing what makes Aryans better, he uses this ubiquitous human feature to show that people are all the same.

As the movie progresses, these events that foreshadow the coming tragedy quicken in pace and severity. One of the most startling and ingenious ways in which Benigni shows the progressive darkening of the tone of the film is when Dora is at an engagement party with her fiancé, whom she does not want to marry. She is surrounded at the table by her upperclass family and colleagues, including the principal from the school where she works. The principal mentions how amazed she is with German schoolchildren because of one of the math problems that she heard they had to solve. The problem that she cites asks how much money the state will save if it eliminates 300,000 undesirables that cost the state an average of four marks a day. Dora is shocked because she is absolutely horrified at the implications of this math problem. It casually affirms that the murder of 300,000 people, considered undesirables, is acceptable and has this as an ideological basis, underlying what is taught to schoolchildren. When she sees Dora’s expression and hears her protestation, the principal says that she had the same reaction as Dora. Dora is momentarily comforted that someone is as horrified as she is until the principal reveals that the reason she was shocked was because the math was way too difficult to give to third graders. This confusion of isotopies between Dora and the principal is structurally the same as a comic misunderstanding, but because of the connotations that this problem carries for the audience (who are well aware of how many undesirables the Nazis did
eliminate), it is impossible to appreciate this incongruity as comic. Dora’s dismay is obvious as she realizes what this comment says about the principal, and her horror only increases at the casual way that her fiancé tries to answer the question. Everyone accepts this math problem without questioning the moral implications that are inherent in its underlying ideology.

Despite these somewhat sobering foreshadowings of the war to come, the first half of the film ends with a traditional comic (in the sense of the theatrical form) ending. Guido wins the fair Dora by rescuing her from her fiancé and rides away with her like a knight on a white horse. He does, literally, ride on a white horse (a comic literalization of a figurative expression), but this convention is subverted in a somewhat sobering manner in that most of the horse has been painted green and is covered with antisemitic sentiments. Again, this situation has all the structural markings of a comic incongruity, but the sense of the comic is mixed with a foreboding sense of dangerous anticipation. At first glance, it is incongruous to see a green horse; it is unexpected and out of place. The skull and crossbones and antisemitic messages, however, do not allow the audience to casually laugh at the incongruity; there is a sense of tragedy uneasily mixed with the comedy, and although this section of the film has a happy ending (the boy gets the girl), it is tainted by the racist current that overshadows Dora and Guido’s union.

Another important moment happens at the start of the second half of the film after Guido has run away with and married Dora. It is now near the end of the war. Guido and Dora have a young child, Giosuè and things are getting much worse for Jews. The tone is markedly different as we see signs of the war such as statues being sandbagged against
bomb attacks, and German soldiers marching through town. When Giosuè sees a sign in a window shop that says “No Jews or dogs,” he naturally asks his father why this is so. In order to protect his son from the evil of the world he makes light of the sign, and at the same time, shows how ridiculous it is. Guido tells his son that the store does not allow dogs and Jews because the owners do not like them. He then goes on to say that he saw another store that did not allow Spaniards and horses and a drugstore that did not allow Chinese or kangaroos. Guido then asks his son if there is any animal he does not like. Giosuè replies that he does not like spiders. Guido says that he does not like Visigoths. He tells his son that they will put up a sign on their bookshop forbidding entrance to Visigoths and spiders. The meaning of this scene is obvious. Benigni shows that it is exactly as ludicrous to discriminate against Jews as it is to discriminate against any of these other groups. This also demonstrates the power of comedy as an approach to a serious or tragic situation. Guido turns a serious, even dangerous sign, into a comedic one, by emphasizing its inherent incongruities and provides a serious commentary on the kind of ignorance and bigotry that lies at the base of such actions.

Guido, while working in his bookstore, is forced to accompany some officials to the Prefect’s office as part of some unexplained racial harassment. He leaves his young son in charge of the bookstore and accompanies the two official looking men. As he walks away, he looks back conspiratorially to his son and starts to exaggerate their stiff walk, turning it into a mockery of a goose step. By showing how ridiculous it is, Guido turns a thing designed to show order and precision into a thing of comic derision.

Shortly after this event, Guido and his family are abruptly taken to the
concentration camp. On their way to the train, Guido tells his son that where they are going is a surprise in order to protect him from what is really going on. When he tells Giosuè how much fun they are going to have, he laughs nervously and soon it is unclear whether he is laughing or crying. Guido is right at the edge that divides comedy from tragedy. At the camp, Guido decides that in order to protect his son, he must convince him that this is all a game. In order for his son to be able to grow up and believe that life is beautiful, Guido has to teach him a way to cope with the tragedies of life. He chooses to teach him through laughter and by making the experience into a game. Borsatti states, “He uses a smile to preserve a child from horror, so that he can continue to believe that life is beautiful. It is an idea worthy of Chaplin, for the seriousness of the comedy, for the inseparable complementarity of comedy and tragedy” (106).

In the midst of this dark and uncertain setting where Guido now finds himself, is one of the funniest scenes in the film. A German guard comes in to give instructions to the group of new arrivals. He asks for someone who speaks German to translate for the group. Guido volunteers, even though he does not speak German. As the German guard explains the rules, Guido mistranslates them explaining the instructions for the rules of Giosuè’s game, rules that are designed to keep him alive and unaware of the horror that surrounds them. The translation is awkward at times as he tries to incorporate gestures and phrases from the guard that do not initially fit into his description. The comparison between the expected rules of the camp and Guido’s translation creates an incongruity that functions at several levels. Borsatti describes this scene as an overturning of tragic reality that Guido transforms into a playful guise (105). Even though the situation is still very
dangerous and the overall tone of the film has become quite dark, the comic moment provides a sharp contrast to the serious tone of the film.

The game continues throughout the second half of the film, with Guido often having to improvise to both save Giosuè’s life and keep him interested enough and believing in the game. Improbable circumstances sometimes conspire to help in his attempt. When Guido explains to Giosuè that they have earned sixty points on their first day, Giosuè asks if that is a lot. Just then another prisoner, who had hurt his arm earlier, enters and says that he got twenty stitches. This exchange, unfortunately, does not translate well into English so the subtitles only awkwardly convey this idea, but, in Italian, the word for points (as in score) is the same as the word for stitches. Giosuè, who is working within the isotopic structure of the game, immediately reads the prisoner’s remark as having only achieved twenty points whereas he and his father achieved sixty. The polysemous structure provides a comic incongruity and at the same time subverts the tragedy of the prisoners wound into a reinforcement of the isotopy of the game for Giosuè.

The abuse of the bodies of the prisoners provides an interesting comparison between the comic and tragic use of violence. Physical abuse has been a staple of comedy since ancient Greek times and Benigni makes use of it in the first half for its comic potential in scenes like the one where he accidentally drops a flowerpot on Dora’s fiancé’s head. On top of this, Guido’s breakfast, in the form of raw eggs, ends up in the fiancé’s hat and subsequently smashed on his head. In the second half of the film “the familiar conventions of comedy once again take on a darker cast, calling attention to the abuse of
the body and the disregard for and willful destruction of material needs” (Landy, *Film* 120). Kierkegaard addresses this same idea, emphasizing the connection between the comic and the tragic. “The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction” (qtd. in Morreall, *Philosophy* 83).

At one point Giosuè has overheard someone saying that the Germans burn and make buttons and soap out of the people in the camp. When Guido then tells him how ridiculous that is, it is unclear whether he is trying to convince Giosuè or himself. Again Benigni points out the absolute absurdity of what actually happened. It is at the same time too horrible and too absurd to be true. Guido, who is terrified by the truth he understands from his son’s ears, and faced with the knowledge that this is exactly what must have happened to his elderly uncle who accompanied them to the camp, is on the edge between laughter and tears. The appropriate response to the tragedy of the statement is to cry and the appropriate response for the absurdity is to laugh; Guido’s response lies somewhere between the two. “Laughing is allowed precisely because before and after the laughing, weeping is inevitable” (Eco, *Travels* 275).

When Giosuè gets tired of the living conditions and the game, he tells his father he wants to go home. Guido agrees and starts to pack his stuff. When Giosuè expresses surprise that they will actually let them leave Guido’s irony is lost on Giosuè, but not on the audience. “What do you think they do, force people to stay here? That’ll be the day.” Shortly thereafter Guido tells Giosuè, “This is a serious game!” While his son thinks this means that it is very hard and will require that he seriously work at it to get the promised
prize of a real tank, Guido knows that it is, in fact, a very serious game. If they lose the
game, everything will end in tragedy.

The rest of the film follows Guido’s frantic attempts to survive, to save his wife,
and to save and protect his son from the terrible truth that surrounds them. After the war
has ended, the panicked Germans start taking out truck loads of prisoners, presumably to
execute them. Guido learns that the key to survival is to keep his family off of the trucks.
He hides Giosuè in a small metal box, telling him that if they do not get caught this night,
they will win the game and the real tank. After he leaves Giosuè, he sees that one of the
guard dogs has smelled him in the box and is trying to get to him. Guido once again
employs his understanding of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of the will to will the dog away
from Giosuè. This functions structurally as a running gag in the film and it also ties this
moment, where the stakes are very high, back to its comical antecedents, lifting for a
moment the weight of the horror that surrounds them.

Benigni does not pull his punches. He does not attempt to diminish the horror or
the danger that Guido faces. When Guido is captured while trying to rescue his wife, the
audience still hopes for his survival. He is marched at gunpoint in front of where his son is
hiding and the two exchange one last joke. Guido winks at his son and then once again
starts his exaggerated goose step, showing his laughing son that it still really is a game.
Guido does not go to his death with the restraint and outward dignity prized of the world.
He chooses to face death as his he did life, by courageously refusing to take seriously the
game that is life. He shows that we can always laugh, even at pain and death and teaches
that to his son by his example. In this film, “comedy is not offered as mere entertainment;
it is an alternative mode for confronting, not rationalizing, cruelty and suffering, a way of thinking differently about the conditions necessary for survival in extremely adverse conditions. [. . .] [T]hrough the seriousness of comedy, the film invites the audience to ask different questions, about the survivors, rather than merely providing another memorial to the dead” (Landy, Film 120). Life is Beautiful shows that life continues, even in the face of tragedy; historically that is a comic characteristic. “Comedy’s basic message is that the human race will survive, that it is destined to carry on” (Grawe 17).

For this to be a comedy, Guido must survive. He is led off screen by a German guard and then the audience hears the machine gun fire. Frye describes the inevitability of the tragic ending. “we know that the tragic hero cannot simply rub a lamp and summon a genie to get him out of his trouble” (Frye 207). Guido’s death is not actually shown and it happens so quickly that it comes as a great shock. It is almost unbelievable because at some level, we understand that the film we are watching is a comedy. We are confused by the switches between the tragic and comic modes which we have experienced throughout the film. Mast argues that the difference between comedy and tragedy lies in the climate they create, not in the plot, which tragedy often shares with comedy (Mast 8). If this were really a comedy, Guido would make a last minute escape, but as a tragedy he is gunned down with cold ruthless efficiency. Benigni does not drag out the scene for pathos or sympathy. He shows the brutal and abrupt way that life often ended in these camps and lets the camera linger on the entrance to the alleyway where his death took place. A tragedy often ends with the tragic death of the hero, but the film does not end here. “The watcher of death and tragedy has nothing to do but sit and wait for the inevitable end; but something gets born at the end of comedy [. . .]” (Frye 170).
After everyone has left the camp, Giosuè emerges from the place where his father has safely hidden him and sees a real tank manned by the American Army. He believes that he has won the first prize for the game as his father promised. The Americans give Giosuè a ride until he sees his mother in the long line of refugees. They reunite to a voice over of the older Giosuè saying, “This is my story. This is the sacrifice my father made. This was his gift to me” (Life is Beautiful). It was a gift of life, but it was also a gift of knowing how to deal with the tragedy of life through laughter. Guido’s sacrifice is mythic, but it is one that, because of the shifting and ambiguous tone of the film, must be reevaluated in a comic context (Borsatti 108). “Comedy is much concerned with integrating the family and adjusting the family to society as a whole; tragedy is much concerned with breaking up the family and opposing it to the rest of society” (Frye 218). The film straddles the boundaries of tragedy and comedy; it is both, and at the same time, neither.

Giosuè embraces his mother and lifts his fists in the air shouting “We’ve won! We’ve won!” This phrase has multiple meanings for the audience. Giosuè has won the game and got his tank. Guido has also won. He has saved his family’s life even though it has cost his own. He has won by not giving up and by seeing the comedy in life and teaching it to his son. At the same time, this is also a victory for humanity. Benigni is saying that family, love, and integrity can survive the worst of trials, that even though they can kill the body, they can never conquer the majesty of the soul. Giosuè’s next phrase is also filled with multiple levels of semiotic meaning. The English subtitled words are “A
thousand points to laugh like crazy about!” For Giosuè, these points are the points of the
game, for the audience, it means a thousand things in life to laugh about. The Italian
translation has embedded in it some much more subtle and important connotations. In
Italian it reads “Mille punti da schiattare dal ridere” which more accurately translates into
English as “A thousand points to die laughing about.” As mentioned previously, “points”
in Italian, is polysemous. In this case it can be read as both “scored points” and “details.”
It is important to note here, that we have the same incongruous and paradoxical structure
as pure comedy, but it is mixed with the tragedy of Guido’s death and Guido did, in fact,
die laughing, laughing at the comedy of life. Our emotional responses to the situation are
likewise mixed. The line between the comic and the tragic here disappears. The image
that the film freezes on is Giosuè with his arms in the air once again repeating “We’ve
won!” Life continues, and even though the comedy in it is inextricably connected to the
tragedy, life is beautiful.

The Modern Role of Comedy

Although many things about comedy have remained the same over the centuries
since its aesthetic origins in Ancient Greece, much has also changed. Just as comedy
flouts and subverts the rules of others, it refuses to be pinned down by the rules used to
describe it. It lives on contradictions and the dynamic contact of opposition (Sainati 12).
In speaking of the relationship between comedy and tragedy Smith states:

Nevertheless, there is a difference in degree, if not in kind, a difference
which accounts for the relative subordination of comedy to tragedy as a
form of dramatic art. Comedy concerns itself principally with the issues of
conduct in their social significance. It may delve deeply for the motives of anti-social conduct; it may universalize the character-flaw in the individual; but the fact remains that it is not primarily interested in the results of conduct upon the ethical consciousness of the hero. It thus limits itself to that portion of human nature which expresses itself in man’s social communion with his fellows. It universalizes individual man in society. Tragedy, on the other hand, envisages human nature as a whole. It is not limited to a specific field, nor is it primarily concerned with the outward consequences of the tragic flaw in character. What it gives us is a comprehensive and inclusive portrayal of human nature. As a result, the characterization of tragedy is more complex, less simplified than that of comedy [. . .]. (167)

In Life is Beautiful specifically and in the modern world generally, the clear definitions of comedy and tragedy that Smith described in 1930 no longer apply. Comedy is not merely light entertainment (although I maintain that this is a valid function of comedy in itself), but it has important social, moral, philosophical, and religious ramifications (Pantieri 16). It is not somehow less than tragedy, it is different, but inextricably linked to it. It is an essential part of human life and deserves to be celebrated and used for all the advantages that it can provide in making life beautiful. Roberto Benigni, in a 1985 interview, said that comedy is a gift that gives pleasure and joy (Marlia 72), a belief that he has demonstrated throughout his body of work, but done so most elegantly in Life is Beautiful.

Martin Grotjahn once wrote, “[The clown] also represents the sadness of things
and finally comes to stand for death in the person of the tragic, truly great clown. This is the point when tragedy and comedy finally meet and symbolize human life” (qtd. in Merchant 11). Roberto Benigni is a clown who symbolizes these two opposing yet connected (and at points parallel) sign systems. His role as Guido perfectly demonstrates the tragedy and comedy of the human condition. Benigni said of himself, “The impulse inside of me is to create the tragic, but nothing doing, my flesh is made in a comic manner. Even my chest hair moves in a comic manner. Every time that I think about a new film, I think of something tragic, really heavy. But my knees, my thighs move in a comic manner and I am stymied by my body” (qtd. in Borsatti 7). He goes on to argue that there is an equality between comedy and tragedy (Borsatti 7). It seems that there has always been a kind of symbiotic relationship between the two, even when the generic forms would have us to hold them as distinct and separate entities. These generic differences are largely a matter of classification and perception.

In discussing how the sign played a role in the interpretation of oracular divination in ancient Greek literature, Manetti makes some observations that sound very similar to our discussion of incongruity, ambiguity, and comedy.

The obscurity of the sign is primarily linked to the difficulty, which then inevitably becomes the impossibility, of solving this problem of interpretation. It must be said, however, that first of all the human individual [. . .] demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to the words of the prophecy in various ways [. . .]. However, in the final analysis the fundamental error is always that of choosing the wrong term of the
alternative interpretations presented by the ambiguous sign. (Manetti, Antiquity 24)

The problem is then a case of incorrectly disambiguating an ambiguous sign. One example that he gives of this is the oracular prophecy that drives the action in the story of Oedipus (Manetti, Antiquity 28). If it had not been erroneously interpreted, the play would not have ended in tragedy. There is a close connection here between comedy and the aesthetic experience which allows us to appreciate the irony in Oedipus without finding it funny (Martin 77). Manetti then goes on to describe how this functions more specifically. “In semiotic terms, in all literary episodes of oracular divination, the human individual invariably interprets the text in a literal mode when it should have been read in what we may term an enigmatic mode. […] It is obvious that when the metaphoric vehicle is interpreted ‘literally’, an absurdity on the level of meaning is produced […]” (Antiquity 24-5). As we have discussed, this is exactly the same semiotic condition that leads to the incongruity of comedy. Since comedy is not bound by rules, and lets us, even encourages us, to jump to conclusions, we can use Manetti’s example and explanation to reveal a profound truth. Life is a tragedy only to those who do not get the joke.
“Let me explain. No, there is too much. Let me sum up.”

-Inigo Montoya (The Princess Bride)

**Conclusion: “Do You Suppose I Can Buy Back my Introduction to You?”**

Over the course of this work, we have examined comedy as an aesthetic phenomenon and done so by employing semiotics as our method of understanding how comedy functions in a variety of art forms. While this process is complex in its intricacies, on the surface it is a fairly simple remotivation of sign to a different context or meaning. By upsetting existing semiotic systems and causing us to examine them in new ways, comedy expands our ability to understand and interact with the world. Eco argues that art stretches our understanding of the world and causes us to revise our interpretations of it (Platypus 222). This capacity of art to see the world in a different way is what Manetti refers to as the artist’s privileged vision of things (“Ready Made” 85). Milner applied this idea specifically to comedy when he stated that “through the juxtaposition of two universes, and owing to the reversal of familiar syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures, we suddenly see hidden patterns and relations made plain and manifest” (27). This is one of the great things about comedy; it can teach us to see our world in new and interesting ways.

Comedy also can be a way of coping or dealing with the world in which we are immersed. Eugene Ionesco stated “the comic alone is able to give us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence” (144). It is thus a defense from the dangers of the world. “Comedy alone is both a statement of the human condition and a tenable response to it”
Humor does not only have an affect on us in the big picture, but it can also make the day to day easier. Satterfield suggests that comedy can act as a kind of shorthand making communication both more economical and fun (162). Best of all, comedy can be enjoyed as a purely aesthetic experience. It does not have to teach us anything, it does not have to improve our minds or our abilities; it can simply be enjoyed as any artistic experience can, as something speaking directly to the human soul.

In this work, we have studied comedy as it appears in a variety of art forms including verbal and linguistic comedy, narrative comedy (touching briefly on literary comedy, satire, parody, and irony), theatrical comedy, comedy in the visual arts, and film comedy, all as semiotic phenomena. I have argued that film is an ideal medium to explore comedy from an interdisciplinary perspective subscribing to the idea that it is “the most semiotically complex of all media, the most aesthetically rich” (Wollen 154). Because film incorporates such a wide variety of art forms and is inherently interdisciplinary, it is able to address some of the complex interactions between the different signifying systems and reveal a wealth of information about how semiotics functions in an interdisciplinary context. During this process, I have made a special attempt to synthesize and incorporate a variety of sources on the semiotic structure of comedy, focusing particularly on the Italian school of semioticians whose work has largely been ignored in English language discourse. By exploring this neglected area of scholarship, I have attempted to advance the field of humor research in the arts, reintroduce valuable comic theory into academic discourse, and expand the field of semiotics.

While this work is intended to expand, synthesize, and extrapolate from existing
semiotic theories of comedy, there is much that still needs to be done. More should be done in exploring the multiplicity of semiotic approaches to a particular art form, including structural, contextual, sociological, and psychological information in a minute and exhaustive analysis of a single work. This should be done for works in a variety of artistic media, much like the project that Roland Barthes set for himself in his work, S/Z, creating an exhaustive semiotic reading of a short story. In addition, many art forms have been largely or completely absent from our discussion of the semiotics of comedy and should be explored from this perspective. These art forms include music, architecture, sculpture, and dance. Similarly, a semiotic approach to comedy needs to be expanded to deal more directly with how comedy functions at a semiotic level across cultural, linguistic, and social barriers.

Attardo argues that with the division of the sciences into separate academic disciplines after the Renaissance, comedy likewise was broken up and developed only within the context of separate disciplines, specifically in philosophy, sociology, physiology, literature, and psychology (45). The use of semiotics is a solution to this fragmented trend because, as Eco describes, semiotics is an interdisciplinary approach (Sebeok 8). Deely also sees semiotics as the best way to overcome disciplinary barriers.

From this point of view—that of its inherently interdisciplinary structure or ‘nature’—semiotics is ‘the only game in town.’ [. . .] No longer is an interdisciplinary outlook something contrived or tenuous. On the contrary, it is something built-in to semiotics, simply by virtue of the universal role of signs as the vehicle of communication within and between specialties, as
everywhere else, wherever there is cognition, mutual or unilateral. (Deely xiv)

Semiotics is a truly comprehensive way to study comedy because all comedy must somehow be conveyed through signs. As has been shown, semiotics has the versatility and the adaptability to allow us to approach a variety of media in a variety of ways. Through applying semiotics to aesthetic theories of comedy and various art forms, we can understand how semiotic meaning is undermined, subverted and transformed for comic purposes. Although a conscious knowledge of how comedy functions at a semiotic level is not a necessary and sufficient condition for us to experience comedy, at some cognitive level, we assess incongruities and make the connections that allow us to appreciate the comic experience. This project has attempted to delve into these semiotic processes so that we can understand how to follow the signs of comedy.
Works Cited


Altman, Rick. Film/Genre. London: British Film Institute, 1999.


Johnson, Brian D. “Gallows humor.” Maclean’s. 9 Nov. 1998: 89.


---. “Per una Semiotica del Comico.” Il Verri. 3 (1976): 130-152.


Sprague, Rosamond Kent. “Platonic Jokes with Philosophical Points.” *Laughter Down*


Travers, Peter. Rev. of Life is Beautiful (La Vita È Bella). Dir. Roberto Benigni. Perf.


**A note on translations:** Translations from Italian and French sources are the author’s.
Figures

Figure 1

Figure 2
Figure 3

Figure 4
Figure 5

Figure 6
Figure 7
Marcel Duchamp L.H.O.O.Q. Anne D’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, eds., Marcel Duchamp. (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1989) Figure facing 128.

Figure 8
Figure 9

Figure 10
Figure 11

Figure 12
Figure 13

Figure 14
Figure 15

Figure 16
Figure 17

Figure 18
Figure 19

Figure 20
Figure 21

Figure 22
Figure 23

Figure 24
Figure 25

Figure 26
Figure 27

Figure 28
Figure 29

Detail of Figure 29
Figure 30