I, Leah K Kaplan, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

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A New Theory About the Brontosaurus: Humor as Absurdity and the Violation of Expectations in Monty Python's Flying Circus

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A New Theory About the Brontosaurus: Humor as Absurdity and the Violation of Expectations in

*Monty Python’s Flying Circus*

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Abstract

This study examines the rhetorical functions of humor in *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*. In the series, incongruity is the most common function of humor as the show has violated audience expectations with absurdity. Absurdity is also used to satirize institutions, symbols of authority, and middle-class British culture in seven thirty-minute episodes. In addition, this study evaluates *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*’ violation of the sketch comedy genre through its unique form and editing techniques. Finally, this study concludes that the series continues to be popular with new audiences because the abandonment and interruption of sketches unsettles generic conventions and generates laughter even decades later.
Acknowledgments

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Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review

When *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* [hereafter referred to as *Flying Circus*] first appeared on BBC-1 on October 5, 1969, the first image was of Michael Palin in ragged clothes swimming to shore gasping for breath. The first spoken line of the program was a breathless, “It’s.” Composed of six men – five Britons and one American – the Monty Python troupe broke generic expectations regarding sketch comedy programs. They produced sketches that illustrated absurdity – defined as “a situation that goes against all logical rules” (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p. 153) – as humor in a way that differentiated from the standardized formula of comedic sketches. In the episodes to follow, there were dead parrots, hermit conventions, men named Smoketoomuch who could not pronounce the letter “C,” diners which served spam – and a lot of spam – with every item, “athletic” competitions to determine the upper-class twit of the year, and many other moments of absurdity and lunacy, none of which was what was expected of the sketch comedy genre. This chapter will provide a description of the series and the members of the Monty Python troupe and a theoretical rationale for this study prior to an extensive literature review drawn from both humor and generic form.

Although when *Flying Circus* first aired on BBC late on Sunday nights in a time slot that was not ideal in terms of general ratings, “the rumors of its surreal brilliance spread along the schoolboy grapevine, catchphrases [from the series] began to appear in newspapers, and mildly satirical visual gags, like the Upper-Class Twit of the Year Contest or the Ministry of Silly Walks, were greeted as though they represented mad anarchy” (Walsh, 2009). After initial hesitation in Britain from those audiences who were not yet sure of what to make of the more absurdist elements of *Flying Circus* (Landy, 2005; Neale & Krutnik, 1990; Thomas, 2009; Walsh, 2009), the series established a cult following for the Monty Python comedy troupe as its popularity began to grow during the first season. After the completion of the first thirteen
episodes in 1970, Michael Mills, who was the head of comedy and light entertainment for the
BBC, wrote a congratulatory note to John Cleese saying, “The show seems to be getting better
and better and this is a view shared by most people who see it” (as cited in Thomas, 2009). In
addition, George Harrison – of Beatles fame – once told Michael Palin that the series was “the
only sane thing on television” (as cited in Palin, 2006, p. 204) when the two first met in 1974.

Derived from the music hall and variety performances in Britain – and vaudeville in
America – the sketch comedy genre, or type, depicts certain qualities of a sketch that audiences
expect. In order to define the term “sketch” for the generic analysis of television sketch comedy,
Neale wrote, “Sketches are short, usually single-scene structures. They generally comprise a
setting, one or more characters, and an internal time frame” (2001c, p. 62). This definition of a
sketch drives audience expectations. As audience members, we expect sketch comedy programs
to follow a pattern: either a monologue, double-act (two characters), or in rare cases a group that
leads up to a single-line punch-line and then concludes by fading to black. The members of
Monty Python were aware of the sketch formula because they had worked as writers during the
early-to-mid 1960s on BBC sketch comedy programs that were produced by David Frost before
eventually forming Monty Python in 1969 (Life of Python, 1999). By knowing these expectations,
they were able to satirize – defined as using ridicule, sarcasm, and irony in order to expose or
attack social practices and conventions – them on Flying Circus.

This study on humor as absurdity and the violation of expectations in Flying Circus will
be broken into four chapters. This first chapter will provide a theoretical rationale for the study
and a review of literature on humor, satire, and genre expectations and generic analysis in
television programs, including studies on Flying Circus. Chapter two will provide a description of
the series and place it in historical context. The same chapter will also comment on Flying
Circus’ representation of symbols of authority and social satire. Chapter three will be arranged
chronologically and will analyze micro-elements of seven *Flying Circus* episodes. The fourth chapter will conclude with broad implications and suggestions for future research.

*Purpose/Justification*

In the past, special attention has been paid to the treatment of gender and sexuality (Landy, 2005) and religion (Faison, 2006; Huss, 2006) in the products of Monty Python. However, *Flying Circus* presented an interpretation of comedy and humor that has become an integral part of television culture. The work of Monty Python has been referenced in numerous contexts ranging from the political to more recent television programs.

Through its unique interpretation of humorous content, *Flying Circus* has become an integral part of television culture. Scholars such as Dow (1996), Fiske and Hartley (2003), and Neale (2001c) have argued that television programs should not be passed-over in scholarly research merely because the medium itself is low-brow and populist. Of early television criticism studies, Fiske and Hartley (2003) wrote:

> Treated as a part of mass society, television was routinely analyzed [by scholars in the field during television’s earlier years] for outcomes that were known in advance to be negative. It was a bad object, blamed for social, political, cultural and behavioral ills. It attracted very little progressive optimism in formal academic, intellectual and critical writing. This was in large part a symptom of twentieth century intellectual politics, with television as merely the latest in a long line of miscreant media. (p. xi)

Regardless of the tendency for the elite to view television and television studies as an ill of society, in the 1990s, media scholars began to take television more seriously as it has a significant impact on culture. The impact of *Flying Circus* has resonated well in the study cultural humor because it was – and even still is – extremely popular with a very devoted audience. One example of such an adaption is ex-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s quoting of the Parrot Sketch during
the December 10, 1990 Conservative Party Conference in Bournemouth, England. As a response to that event, Eric Idle said, “Monty Python has infiltrated even the most extremely ring-wing Britons” (Life of Python, 1999).

Although humor that is incongruous in theory is often mistaken for only being silly and lacking logic, Flying Circus needs an audience that is knowledgeable of social and generic norms in order to comprehend and fully enjoy the “Oxbridge [which is the term used to describe performers who attended Oxford University and/or Cambridge University – as five of the six Pythons had] humor which encompasses elements of satirical elitism” (Wagg, 1992, p. 268).

Literature Review

As a cultural artifact, a range of literature has been written about Monty Python. The surviving members – Graham Chapman succumbed to cancer in 1989 – continue to resurrect their shared history for documentaries and books. In addition, authors who have written about the history of satire and modern humor in the mass media have been unable to responsibly ignore the contributions of Monty Python. Flying Circus is an artifact of television history. This broader area of study will be narrowed by examining studies of humor and satire. Humor and satire relate to a generic criticism of sketch comedy and specific micro elements of Flying Circus.

Satire and Humor

If “humor is the counterforce to power” (Berger, 1996, p. 16) then satirical television programming looked to question the laws of authority. Wilmut (1980) used Webster’s 20th Century Dictionary to define satire as “a literary work in which vices, follies, stupidities, abuses, etc. are held up to ridicule and contempt” and “the use of ridicule, sarcasm, irony, etc. to expose, attack, or deride vices, follies, etc.” (as cited in Wilmut, 1980, p. 53). Satire was molded “to represent nothing so much as a fear of politics, of confronting social issues, or of ‘taking things too seriously’” (Wagg, 1992, p. 261). Although Berger (1996) and Wagg (1992; 1996; 2002)
were each examining satire in different cultures (Berger in American culture and Wagg in British culture), each acknowledge that satire is constructed in reaction to authority or control.

Satire is only one element of humor. In his study on humor and politics, Berger writes, “It is humour that enables us to see politicians for what they are – human beings, with the same problems we all face. [...] Humour strips away illusion and awe” (1996, p. 16). By mocking or parodying those who have more power than us, we are attempting to level the playing field. Some examples Berger (1996) used were comics who remarked on President Gerald Ford’s clumsiness or Vice President Dan Quayle’s lack of intelligence. Whether making fun of a political – or otherwise elite – figure or an element of culture, Berger argued that “all humour has a political dimension to it” (1996, p. 27). There is a motive behind all forms of humor.

In his study of rhetoric, Kenneth Burke found that every act had a motive. Burke was “concerned with the basic forms of thought which, in accordance with the nature of the world as all men necessarily experience it, are exemplified in the attributing of motives” (1945, p. xv). Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003) and Meyer (2000) used Burke’s rhetorical terms in each of their studies on communicating humor. Humor can be “an influential communication tool” (Meyer, 2000, p. 328). Whether humor in communication is used for unification or used for division, which scholars (Gring-Pemble, 2003; Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000; Wagg, 2002) have found to be the “two basic [formats]” (Meyer, 2000, p. 311) of humor, rhetorical studies of humor evaluate motivations and its ability to influence audiences.

Research of humor in communication has found three strategies of humor: humor as superiority, humor as relief, and humor as an interpretation of incongruity (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004; Meyer, 2000; Lynch, 2002). Of incongruity theory, Lynch writes:

Jokes and laughter may also stem from the recognition that something is inconsistent with the expected rational nature of the perceived environment. Something can be found
funny if it is irrational, paradoxical, illogical, incoherent, fallacious, or inappropriate. As Groucho Marx says, “Humor is reasoning gone mad.” The conception of humor as incongruity does not exclude the superiority or relief motivations of humor, but suggests that laughter is based on intellectual activity rather than a drive to feel superior or to relieve tension. (2002, p. 428)

In their study of humor’s use in audiovisual media, Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004) found that “surprise” humor was playing a “predominant” role in the commercials they examined. “Surprise” humor is defined similarly to Lynch’s description of incongruity humor. Surprise humor was classified as “equally innocent but cognitively more demanding [in comparison to what the authors had classified as ‘clownish humor’], involves sudden changes of concepts and images” (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p. 162). From their examination of Dutch television commercials, Buijzen and Valkenburg concluded that those commercials aimed at a general audience represented and made use of all three functions – superiority, defined as laughing at another to position them as inferior, relief, defined as laughter as a release of stress, and incongruity – of humor.

In the study of humor as incongruity, Staley and Derks write, “The incongruity between the ideas in a joke will be found amusing if several necessary conditions beyond comprehension are met” (1995, p. 99). Incongruity needs to be understood, but also social and emotional factors can determine whether or not a joke can be perceived as funny. In their study, Staley and Derks (1995) showed a large auditorium of people eight cartoons – four nonsense cartoons and four “incongruity resolutions cartoons” (p. 112) – and had the participants self-report and rate the cartoons for funniness. From the results, a clear distinction between nonsense and incongruity was determined, just as Buijzen and Valkenburg (2004) distinguished between clownish (nonsense) and surprise (incongruity).
Incongruity not only exists in visual and audio-visual forms. Understanding incongruity requires more intellect than the understanding of relief theory (Eastman, 1921; Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 2000). Because an audience needs to recognize that logical situations are not being fulfilled in humor as incongruity, evidence exists of incongruity being used in linguistics. Liu approached humor as incongruity through a psycholinguistic approach. Psycholinguistics views “speaking and listening [as] basically different activities: in speaking, people put ideas into words, while in listening, they turn words into ideas” (Liu, 1995, p. 177). Psycholinguistics expects people to follow a cooperative principle (speaker) and a reality principle (listening). In other words, speakers are expected to be informative as a means of making it easiest for the listening to interpret meaning based on their perception of reality. As incongruity humor violates expectations about reality, “the cooperative principle is often violated for the sake of humor” (Liu, 1995, p. 178). Liu’s study examined quoted sentences and stories – all of which were out of context – and interpreted the various realities that can be examined. These realities are often conflicting. The same sentiment can be changed based on a person’s perceptions and experiences.

Humorous forms, such as burlesque, can often exaggerate realities. Defined as “the use or imitation of serious matter or manner, made amusing by the creation of an incongruity between style and subject” (Jump, 1972, p. 1), burlesque exaggerates humor as incongruity by altering and violating logical relationships between situation and event. Humor takes on various forms, which has been examined in various respects.

Meyer (2000) differentiated between humor and wit in his study. If humor laughs with you, then wit laughs at you. In other words, humor unifies audiences while wit is understood and enjoyed by a smaller portion of an audience; thus, wit is used under humor as a function of superiority. In his lifetime Sigmund Freud contributed a great deal to the theory of wit. The
strength of Freud’s study is “primarily an investigation of wit, or what we have called intellectual jokes” (Eastman, 1921, p. 191). Wit and incongruity each call for intellect on the part of the audience to understand what is funny. As the broader scope of humor is not value-free (Alexander, 1996), Freud valued wit to be a “higher species of humor” (Eastman, 1921, p. 192). Freud found that we enjoyed humor and jokes most often when it violated our intellectual expectations. Eastman clarified this concept stating, “If we were earnestly advising some young man to take a wife, and he should earnestly reply ‘Whose?’ that would give us a pleasure out of all proportion to the proper value of such nonsense” (1921, p. 194). Although adultery is culturally accepted as not funny, in this instance, we are likely to react because we value our own intellect. In other words, we acknowledge that the response “whose?” is not the response we have come to expect. Instead, it is a clever reply. Humor as a form of incongruity encompasses these clever retorts.

Nilsen and Nilsen differentiate between the comic mind and the scientific or artistic mind. They write, “When the artistic or scientific mind demonstrates relationships between two disparate objects or patterns the result is a merger; however when the comic mind demonstrates relationships between two objects or patterns the result is more of a clash than a merger” (1994, p. 128). Sharp humor is determined by a continuum. Two objects need to be disconnected while seemingly unrelated. It is within that tension that Nilsen and Nilsen evaluate malapropisms – or slips of the tongue. These slip-ups relate back to Freud’s view of humor because he [Sigmund Freud] believed humor to be unconscious (Eastman, 1921). In other words, we cannot control what is funny and what is not.

Rhetorical studies of humor encompass relief, superiority, and incongruity (see Table 1, p. 9). Absurdity and burlesque are examples of incongruity because they each present illogical interpretations of reality. Satire on the other hand, encompasses both superiority and incongruity.
Satire laughs at others and positions the comic as superior, however, satire in *Flying Circus* also uses lampooning – or the severe ridiculing – of a person or institution as behaving in an illogical fashion. Rhetorical research on satire, absurdity, and other forms of humor highlight the importance of comic motivations. The research explained in this section examined why people laugh and have found that comedy is a result of illogical situations.

### Table 1: Organizing the Functions of Humor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humor as Relief</th>
<th>Humor as Superiority</th>
<th>Humor as Incongruity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Direct psychological response to: stress or being uncomfortable</td>
<td>Wit</td>
<td>Absurdity; Burlesque</td>
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<td>Satire</td>
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**Television: Genre Criticism and Ideologies**

Although past research has demonstrated the many forms in which humor can exist from the visual to the linguistic, it is important to pay special attention to the medium in which *Flying Circus* is featured by reviewing previous studies that examined genre in visual entertainment media, specifically television. A French term meaning “type” or “kind” (Feuer, 1992; Neale, 2001d), genre theory “has played an important role in the study of literature, theatre, film, television and other art and media forms” (Neale, 2001d, p.1). Genre theory calls for the critic to question what various forms have in common, and from that, what is an ideal representation for such an overall classification. Audiences have certain expectations with each genre. It is for that reason that audiences accept a character that bursts into song while merely walking down the street because they are already familiar with the musical genre (Neale, 2001d). Feuer writes, “At the textual level, genres are ideological insofar as they serve to reproduce the dominant ideology of the capitalist system. The genre positions the interpretive community in such a way as to naturalize the dominant ideologies expressed in the text” (1992, p. 145). In other words, a comment on television’s genre is also a comment on the culture. Critics need to be aware of the dominant ideology that is being expressed in the program.
Neale (2001a) found several ambiguities in the study of television’s generic application. One of the issues needing to be addressed is the question of definition. While there is agreement among scholars of the translation of the word “genre,” when applied to television, questions of definition arise. Neale writes:

[The ‘repertoire of elements’ –classification claims] genres consists of character types, setting, iconography, narrative and style. This definition derives from, and seeks to encompass, popular fiction and films as well as television. It is thus well suited to the study of Westerns, cop, detective and crime forms, melodrama, adventure and science fiction. […] However, in particular when it comes to more medium-specific genres with a less clear-cut narrative or fictional base, ambiguities can arise. (2001a, p. 3)

Because of these ambiguities in certain media texts, there is also debate as to whether the more ambiguous television genres can even be classified as a genre. Both Lacey (2000) and Feuer (1992) argue that without a narrative structure, there is no genre. Feuer refers to genre theory as “a dynamic model” (1992, p. 151) in the way in which it evolves and changes. The narrative structure “develops by reacting to and against previous sitcoms [or whatever genre is being considered for study]. [Therefore,] as the genre ages, it becomes richer by virtue of an increased range of [new generic conventions and structures] that can be cited in each new sitcom” (Feuer, 1992, p. 151). Under this point of view, the ideological narrative is what drives the genre.

Narrative is important not only because it constructs the storyline, but also it can be the very factor that lures an audience in their attraction to storytelling. However, in order to represent all programs that air on television – several of which have been successfully on air for decades (e.g., the quiz show) – Neale (2001a) stresses the importance of including “non-narrative genres” (p. 3) as well as recognizing “hybridity and overlap” (p. 4) of television genres.
A genre’s inherent hybridity reflects the dynamic aspect of a genre. A tragedy constructed today is different than Aristotle’s or Shakespeare’s tragedies (Feuer, 1992). The dynamic nature of genre is important. Perceived expectations are based on what texts of the same genre have come before. Berkenkotter and Huckin write, “Genres are dynamic rhetorical forms that are developed from actors’ responses to recurrent situations and that serve to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning. Genres change over time in response to their users’ sociocognitive needs” (1995, p. 4). With each change in cognitive and cultural ideology, the genre itself changes and can adapt generic expectations of another genre, such as in the case of “the influence of soap opera and/or sitcom not only on medical dramas, cop shows, and Westerns, but on game shows and talk shows as well” (Neale, 2001a, p. 4). Generic hybridity is utilized in several television programs as a reflection of culture.

One such study of hybridity in television genre is Donnelly’s (2001) analysis of adult animation. At the 2010 Golden Globe Awards, Sir Paul McCartney stood on stage and said, “Cartoons are not just for kids.” Although McCartney finished his sentiment with a joke by saying, “They’re [cartoons are] also for adults who take drugs,” the more adult themes that has begun to enter cartoon storylines since the 1990s reflect the notion that older audiences are also engaging in a media form that used to be targeted exclusively at children. Donnelly writes, “Sex and violence were often on the agenda in animations in the 1990s. Ren and Stimpy (1991-4) reinvigorated the classical style of crazy cartooning, and both The Simpsons and South Park (1997) broke new ground for television cartoons” (2001, p. 73). While without the presence of live actors, adult animations might appear to be similar to Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mouse, and Roadrunner – from “the classical period of animation” (Donnelly, 2001, p. 73) – the themes addressed in adult animations create a hybrid-genre. Multiple generic elements are used in a single program, thus creating a hybrid.
Programs that can be seen as a hybrid or mixture of various genres create an interesting study in genre theory. Mittell wrote:

Every aspect of television exhibits a reliance on genre. Most texts have some generic identity, fitting into well-entrenched generic categories or incorporating genre mixing. [...] Audiences used genres to organize fan practices, personal preferences, and everyday conversations and viewing practices. Likewise, academics use generic distinction to delineate research projects and to organize special topic courses, while journalistic critics locate programs within common frameworks. (2001, p. 3)

Generic application is used by a wide-range of television consumers. A program’s specific genre serves as a guide to the audience’s expectations. In spite of what genres say about expectations, Mittell indicated issues to be faced in the study of genre theory and television. Mittell believed, “The greatest obstacle to the development of television-specific genre theory stems from the assumptions of traditional approaches. Most genre theory has focused on issues that may seem outdated to some media scholars. Formal and aesthetic approaches to texts, for example, may seem incompatible with contemporary methods” (2001, pp. 3-4). To address other critics resistance to television genre theory, Mittell’s study addressed genres as “culturally defined, interpreted, and evaluated” (2001, p. 9).

With a cultural approach to genre analysis – rather than the three more traditional approaches: definitional, interpretive, and historical (Mittell, 2001) – Mittell used an analysis of three 1983 Michael Jackson music videos – “Beat It,” “Thriller,” and “Billie Jean” – to “exemplify how generic categories are mobilized in specific instances and how industrial practices work to define genres, linking them to cultural hierarchies and systems of difference” (2001, p. 13). By using a narrow scope – three music videos – Mittell was able to focus on cultural and industry (MTV) practices, particularly the way MTV defined the music video genre.
Although when Mittell was writing his essay, music videos and MTV had a substantial history in modern culture, in 1983, MTV and the concept of music videos was much younger. In his music video for “Thriller,” Michael Jackson had gone beyond merely singing and dancing to a fourteen minute video with long narration segments as well as long dance segments, a spectacle that could rarely be matched at the time (Mittell, 2001). Recognizing the dynamic nature of any genre (Feuer, 1992; Donnelly, 2001; Neale, 2001d), Mittell looked to examine how “MTV actively linked a number of cultural discourses within the genre cluster of the music video: commodified rock rebellion, segregated suburban culture, a ‘rock’ performance style specifically embodying a straight white male identity, and a posture of cutting-edge newness and anticommerical style” (2001, p. 13).

When examined through a cultural lens, genre studies have a cultural hierarchy (Corner, 1999; Mittell, 2001). Because culture depicts certain elements as more important than others – such as the focus on rock rebellion in music videos – Mittell found a need for specificity over broad generalizations. Mittell wrote, “This […] shows the need for detailed specificity, not overarching generalities, in exploring media genres. We can never know a genre’s meaning of its entirety or arrive at its ultimate definition because that is not the way genres operate” (2001, p. 16). Using the music videos for “Thriller,” “Beat It,” and “Billie Jean,” Mittell found five core elements that should be applied to genre analysis in the future. These five practices are:

- Genre analyses should account for the particular attributes of the medium. […] Genre studies should negotiate between specificity and generality. […] Genre histories should be written using discursive genealogies. […] Genres should be understood in cultural practice. […] Genres should be situated within larger systems of cultural hierarchies and power relations. The goal of most cultural media scholarship is not to understand the
media in and of themselves, but rather to look at the workings of media as a component of social contexts and power relations. (Mittell, 2001, pp. 16-18)

Earlier scholars (Feuer, 1992; Lacey, 2000) wanted to believe that television genres were not as important as those studies in genre theory of literature and film because these scholars did not feel that television needed genre descriptions that were specific to the medium; instead, they believed that film genres would be sufficient for television studies. However, Mittell’s (2001) research concluded with an understanding of the cultural practice of television viewership. As a result, because watching television has been increasing since television’s invention, genre theory needs to be reworked for the analysis of television.

The study of genre produces expectations in terms of form. Defined by Burke as “the arousal and fulfillment of expectations” (1966, p. 54), form is a dominant structure in television programs and generic expectations. Fiske and Hartley argued, “Television functions in society as a form of communication” (2003, p. 62). In the communicative process, television performs what is called the bardic function (Fiske & Hartley, 2003; Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983). Meaning that television:

[Often] focuses on our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those that are repressive and reactionary, as well as those that are subversive and emancipator, are upheld, examined, maintained, and transformed. The emphasis is on process rather than product. […] It is with this view that we turn to an analysis of the texts of television that demonstrates and supports the conception of television as a cultural forum. (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983, p. 564)

Within the bardic function, television seeks “to articulate the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality” (Fiske & Hartley, 2003, p. 66). Television is dependent on more general cultural meanings for messages. That is the reason why Newcomb and Hirsch
(1983) and Fiske and Hartley (2003) each spend a significant of their writing speaking to culture and cultural ideologies. As Aubrey Singer wrote, “Television is something by our times, out of our times, for our times. It reflects the virtues and faults of our times” (1976, p. 124). The relationship between television and culture is recursive or interactive: television is not only a product of our culture, but it also works to define our culture or our time.

Program Studies

Among the research done on television’s overall form and ideology, scholars have examined specific television shows, both while they were still on the air (Williams, 1976) and as a review once the series had been completed (Dow, 1996; Walters, 2005). An examination of a single television program uncovers the multi-layered elements that can be analyzed in depth. In regards to seeking out specificity in relation to the multiple layers of a television program, the literature reviewed in this section includes in-depth analyses of single television programs.

Audiences have certain expectations of television programs that scholars need to address when selecting a single program for the scope of a study. Bonnie Dow’s (1996) study is an examination of feminist ideals in The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-1977). In her study of the form a sitcom takes, Carol Traynor Williams (1976) also paid specific attention to The Mary Tyler Moore Show. The show had a cultural impact, not only on the social landscape (Dow, 1996), but also serves as commentary on generic expectations of a situation comedy (Williams, 1976). Dow constructed her study after the show’s completion while Williams was writing while new episodes of The Mary Tyler Moore Show were still being constructed. Therefore, the focus of each study differs in terms of context.

While there are differences in terms of context of Dow’s (1996) and Williams’ (1976) study, both researchers note the emphasis that character plays in the program. Mary Richards had to exhibit certain qualities as a lead character. Williams differentiated between The Mary Tyler
Moore Show and other sitcoms that happened to be on television at the time. She said, “The emphasis is on character – as in All in the Family and M*A*S*H, it is on socio-political issues and in The Odd Couple (etc.), it is on ‘the laugh.’ The Mary Tyler Moore Show does what the usual prime time TV series, drama or comedy, does not do: it develops character” (1976, p. 44). While over the course of the series, characters might change in their ideology (Dow, 1996; Williams, 1976), The Mary Tyler Moore Show became what Williams called “a company auteur, [meaning that the cast members of the program interact with one another to give the program a unique style and stamp] expressive in a certain style that expands the conventions of its popular art form” (1976, pp. 45-46). In that respect, the program “is generally acknowledged as the first popular and long-running television series to clearly feature the influence of feminism” (Dow, 1996, p. 24). The Mary Tyler Moore Show was often perceived as such a front-runner in the course of feminism is because the producers wholly developed the character of Mary Richards (played by Mary Tyler Moore).

Dow wrote, “At thirty, Mary is not a ‘girl’ biding her time until marriage (as was That Girl’s Ann Marie [1966-71]), but a woman who has chosen to pursue a career instead of a man” (1996, p. 30). In her study, Dow was able to decode or extract the meaning of representations of feminism as found in the program itself. Dow paid special attention to the cultural time period during which the show was set in order to describe the importance of context. In the preface to her study she wrote, “When I began to study television, [...] I brought the biases of a rhetorical perspective with me. Key among them was a belief in the importance of context” (1996, p. xiv). Media studies that focus such a narrow scope – often one particular television series – cannot examine a body of data outside of the context in which it exists. Williams’ article illuminates specific details about context. She included an explanation on the “humanistic values [that have
shaped] Mary” (1976, p. 52) and offered the view that even before the series was complete, The Mary Tyler Moore Show was “a pretty special sitcom” (1976, p. 52).

Like Mary Richards, David Brent in the British – and original – version of The Office (2001-2003) exhibited qualities specific to being a lead character in a series. In his critical reading of The Office (2001-2003), starring Ricky Gervais, Ben Walters acknowledged:

In the weeks prior to the first transmission of The Office in July 2001, British situation comedy did not seem to offer much hope of excellence. Several new BBC shows had failed to secure remissions and the Corporation’s comedy department was widely perceived as being in crisis. […] On paper, the series that was about to launch on BBC2 scarcely seems a likely remedy: created and performed by unknowns, it was conspicuously banal in its setting and offered nothing in the way of elaborate plotting or farcical mishap, punch lines or catchphrases. […] Yet The Office would become BBC’s most talked-about sitcom in years, win dozens of domestic and international awards, break sales records on DVD and eventually be sold to over sixty countries and remade for American audiences. (2005, p. 1)

Walters’ study went into great depth involving quotes from the creators as well as dialogue from the show. All of this detail supports Walters’ claim regarding the success of the program. In addition, Walters revisits Fiske and Hartley’s (2003) comment on the generic conventions and expectations of a television program. One of the expectations Walters explores is the expectation the British audience had for the lead character. Such an expectation was a result of lead characters such as John Cleese’s Basil Fawlty in Fawlty Towers (1975-1979), who decades before had behaved in the same bemused manner by often irritating other characters with a desire to influence them to his own standard of life (Walters, 2005). The comparison is a generic comparison.
Lead characters are often a cultural convention in terms of television. Because of this convention, Walters dedicated a good deal of attention in his study to Gervais’ character, David Brent:

a self-deluding ogre with lofty but ultimately pathetic aspirations fully in keeping with a lineage that runs from Anthony Aloysius Hancock [from Hancock’s Half Hour (1956-1960)] and Alf Garnett [from Till Death Do Us Part (1965-1975), the British inspiration for American television program, All in the Family (1971-1979)] through Captain Mainwaring [from Dad’s Army (1968-1977)] and Basil Fawlty. [...] Like all such characters, Brent has a blind spot that prevents him realising the mismatch between his aspirations and his abilities. (2005, p. 125)

Gervais’ portrayal of Brent recognized common traits of a television as a cultural artifact. Knowing that Basil Fawlty and others had come before him, to be successful, the character of David Brent would need to mirror some of the same qualities in order to create a comfortable viewing environment for the audience.

Although characters are important to studies on individual television programs because narrative is often structured around the audiences’ feelings regarding the lead character, not all studies that have selected a small selection of television programming focus on the development of character. Studies can also direct their focus to the audiences’ reaction to television programs due to their expectations of the television genre that the show is classified under by television executives who produce such programming. Television programs attract audience members through either fulfillment or violation of expectations.

When setting out to begin their study, Young and Tisinger (2006) wanted to challenge the assumption that younger audiences were tuning into late night comedy programs (for example, Saturday Night Live and The Daily Show) instead of news shows. Although Young and Tisinger
found that the participants they spoke with in completion of the study were watching network news in addition to comedy programs for their news consumption, the researchers noted:

While journalists have focused attention on The Daily Show, some of them display concern over such programming that is political but that does not conform to the norms of traditional news. [...] Ted Koppel may have been speaking for all his network news colleagues when he voiced his “discomfort” with the possibility that young people were turning to The Daily Show for news, a finding that is challenged by the data presented here. (2006, p. 130)

This quote not only speaks to the political and social power that can be seen in television programs, but it also once again has commented on the concept of television and generic expectations. Satirical programs assume the existence of recognizable culturally stable forms and institutions in order to poke fun at them. Therefore, by saying that The Daily Show “does not conform to the norms of traditional news,” there is an indication that there is a traditional form of a television news program. The expectations for a “normal” presentation of a genre can be potentially seen as ignoring the dynamic nature of genres; however, such expectations do manage to regard the cultural importance of television.

Studies that specifically focused on particular programs identified the ability for a television show not only to interact with generic expectations – either through maintaining or shifting the expectations – in order to be regarded as artifacts of importance to audiences. Research has proven that when examined individually, a lot can be determined from a television program in terms of a program’s lasting power and resonance with cultural and universal icons and institutions. This examination done by researchers is important in terms of navigating a study “between specificity and generality” (Mittell, 2001, p. 16), and justifies the approach in this study to look at a single television program.
Specific studies of Monty Python productions have identified a unique interpretation of Python’s humor and cultural commentary. In a way, *Flying Circus* is known for its “use of ostranenie [or de-familiarization] for comic effect: laying bare the conventional device, drawing attention to the artifice inherent in conventional forms of representation in order to produce comic implausibility, and exposing the arbitrary absurdities and limits inherent in these forms” (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 201). Because Monty Python has covered such a vast array of issues of lifestyle as a mode to introduce the silliness inherent in the system (Wagg, 1992), scholars have been able to adopt the work of the Monty Python troupe in order to comment on issues of philosophy, religion, gender and sexuality, and the cases of social construction and meaning.

Hardcastle and Reisch called Britain “a philosophical Mecca for much of the twentieth century” (2006, p. 3). As this was especially true for students at Cambridge and Oxford Universities (as will be described in the next chapter), it would make sense for philosophy to influence Monty Python to the point that Eric Idle wrote what is called the “Bruce’s Philosopher’s Song,” performed by the Pythons – dressed as the memorable Bruces from *Flying Circus* – during their Hollywood Bowl performance in 1982. Harry Brighouse commented on the Bruces and other philosophical influences that can be seen in *Flying Circus*. To begin his essay, he wrote:

*Flying Circus* drove numerous young people of my generation into philosophy. Having been driven into philosophy and stayed, I’m starting to notice how many references to philosophy in Monty Python has some basis in the reality of philosophy as a profession. The Bruces’ Philosopher’s Song, for example, is simultaneously a comment on the incongruity of an Australian accent (regarded by elitist Britons as crass and un-intellectual) combined with something as serious and high-brow as philosophy, and a
tribute to the enormous influence that Australian philosophers had over English-speaking philosophy at the time, and still have. (2006, p. 53)

For much of Brighouse’s essay he paid special attention to the argument clinic sketch, found in the season three episode, “The Money Programme.” The sketch features John Cleese and Michael Palin for the majority of the sketch’s runtime. In the sketch, Palin is interested in having an argument and he grows irritated at Cleese for merely contradicting his every comment because Palin “came in to have a good argument” (line cited specifically in Brighouse, 2006, p. 54). Examining the dialogue exchanged between Palin and Cleese, Brighouse argued that the concept of an argument clinic is not as outrageous as it might seem.

Brighouse believed an argument clinic could serve a philosophical purpose. An argument that would meet the standards Palin expresses in the sketch could “lead [people] toward the truth” (Brighouse, 2006, p. 62). In reaction to the philosophical dilemma of an argument clinic vs. a contradiction clinic, Brighouse explained:

One’s own perspective on moral, and other, matters is necessarily limited. This doesn’t mean that one is completely stuck in one’s own perspective; one can, and should, think as far beyond it as one can. But often, one needs help: someone or, preferably, many people, to present alternatives, with whom one can then uncover agreement and disagreement. Mere contradiction, entertaining as it is to a pantomime audience, simply does not serve this purpose. (2006, p. 54)

Brighouse urged others to look beyond mere entertainment and see the philosophical possibilities of Flying Circus. His study of philosophy in line with Flying Circus offered an explanation that went beyond a reaction to a sketch comedy program.

In their television program, Monty Python did not deal explicitly with religious narratives, especially in comparison with their later work. Flying Circus featured single sketches
(see chapter two, pp. 56-58) that either dressed members of the troupe up as members of the clergy or a sketch featuring a boxing matches that would declare, “God exists by two falls to a submission” (*Flying Circus*: Episode 2, “Sex and Violence,” 1969). Their films, however, would allow for critical commentary on Monty Python’s portrayal of religion, as noted by both Faison (2006) and Huss (2006). For the audience, “scenes pertaining to religious belief in *Holy Grail, Life of Brian*, and *The Meaning of Life* raise the issue of God’s character, his behavior, and the role he plays in our lives” (Faison, 2006, pp. 125-126). In his essay, Huss (2006) examined David Hume’s ontology – or his distinct world-view – and found similarities amongst Hume’s philosophy and scenes in Monty Python films. Huss said, “Hume argued that people everywhere are afraid of the forces which affect their lives but are beyond their control. They call these forces Gods and seek to appease them through religious worship. […] In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, God himself chastises King Arthur for his fearful groveling and supplication” (2006, pp. 150-151). Because the troupe members were responsible for the creation of several productions – television, film, and theatre – scholars have been able to draw from larger issues of philosophy and religion in order to comment on Monty Python.

Not all scholars selected broader philosophical and social issues to review. In her book, Marcia Landy (2005) touched briefly on several elements of *Flying Circus*. She provided context as far as a lawsuit for copyright infringement, which the members of Monty Python had filed against ABC following a compilation of sketches that aired in 1975, which the troupe all found “unacceptable” as well as “totally unfunny, even incoherent” (Landy, 2005, p. 1). While historical context can help illuminate the culture and time in which *Flying Circus* was performed, Landy also illustrated the timeless appeal of the program. She touched briefly on several different elements of *Flying Circus*, which all work together to form “the ‘postmodern’ character of the *Flying Circus*” (2005, p. 39), an approach similar to the one taken in this study; however Landy
(2005) did not analyze episodes in their entirety, and she focused her approach on *Flying Circus*’ commentary on gender and sexuality instead of absurdity and the violation of expectations.

One of the elements that Landy paid the greatest amount of attention to is cross-dressing and gender bending in *Flying Circus*. Landy said, “The comedy of the *Flying Circus* relies on tropes of explosions and physical mutilation that expand in meaning to include dismemberment of cultural forms” (2005, p. 44). Scholars who take interpretive approaches to research would agree that gender norms are constructed through cultural artifacts such as popular television shows. Thus, “in the context of British comedy, drag is not unusual, but in the 1960s and 1970s during what has come to be known as the ‘sexual revolution,’ the use of cross-dressing took on a spectacularly subversive cultural dimension” (Landy, 2005, p. 70). Since during the time, cross-dressing was not unusual or extraordinary, Landy’s focus is largely a commentary on dialogue and social norms more so than the shock value of men appearing in drag on more than one occasion. Landy felt that the program “unsentimentally inverted, exposed, institutional representations of gender and sexuality expressed and disseminated broadly though the culture and though media” (2005, p. 72). Culture and media defines masculinity and feminism. Landy found that *Flying Circus* often turned such conventions in order to address the humor inherent in society.

Familiar to fans of *Flying Circus*, “The Lumberjack Song” presents a critical view of masculinity. Landy said:

One of the most oft-cited sketches from the *Flying Circus* for its inversion of predictable gendered and sexual representation is “The Lumberjack Song,” in which Palin, with [Carol] Cleveland at his side, and a chorus of men dressed as Canadian Mounties, sing what seems to be an innocuous song in praise of the virility of lumberjacking. Reversing associations with the Mounties in popular literature and film, the episode “tarnishes”
familiar images of masculinity by invoking and transgressing the cultural animus toward masculine appropriation of feminine behavior. (2005, p. 72)

A song that had begun with Palin’s desire to be a lumberjack and accomplish culturally masculine feats such as “leaping from tree to tree as [he] floats down the mighty rivers of British Columbia” (Flying Circus: Episode 9, “The Ant, An Introduction,” 1969) ended with Palin’s proclamations of pressing wildflowers, wearing women’s clothing, and wishing he had been a girlie which violate cultural expectations of masculinity.

In Flying Circus, social and cultural expectations are often violated (Landy, 2005; Neale, 2001b; Neale & Krutnik, 1990; Wagg, 1992) as a commentary on cultural constraints and expectations and as a function of incongruity. A look at Flying Circus can also be read as a confirmation of Michel Foucault’s views of social construction. Michelle Spinelli (2006) found that the Monty Python troupe – and their television program, in particular – could often be thought of as synonymous with the concept of madness. She also wrote:

Foucault would say madness is a social construct. Its definition is fluid, changing over time as culture changes. What we, as a society, understand to be madness one day is not what we might consider to be madness the next day. Nor, Foucault writes, does madness itself exist apart from its definitions: “Madness cannot be found in a raw state. Madness only exists in society. It does not exist outside the forms of sensibility that isolate it and the forms of repulsion that exclude or capture it.” […] Monty Python’s village idiot [from Episode 20, “The Atilla the Hun Show,” 1970] is not the same as the madness of the asylum inmate of the nineteenth century. The Python’s idiot lives in contemporary society and is judged mad by that society. (2006, p. 154)

Using a descriptive analysis of the actions of the Monty Python village idiot, a character who performs the task of an idiot for others, but when only the camera could see him, he was eloquent,
Spinelli compared *Flying Circus* with its use of social construction in relation to the notion of absurdist humor by violating casual reasoning with “events that are logically inappropriate” (Charney, 2005, p. 168). The case of the fool – or village idiot – is changing with each new society. *Flying Circus* used the appearance of a fool – played by John Cleese – who inverted the concept of madness by being well-spoken and articulate whenever he was not in front of one of the “normal” citizens. For social construction, as culture and society shifts, as does the definition. Since culture determines genre and classifications, the dynamic nature of culture provides an explanation for why genres are also dynamic. *Flying Circus* not only violates cultural expectations by inverting many societal norms, but it also violates the expectations of its own genre and medium.

Buijzen and Valkenburg define absurdity as “a situation that goes against all logical rules” (2004, p. 153). The humor in *Flying Circus* is largely a result of the absurd. The shows break expected generic forms of television. For forty-five episodes (the last six without John Cleese), the Monty Python troupe satirized and parodied genres of television. These genres were staples of television culture (e.g., game shows and television news reports). The absurdist nature of their humor is recognized as a “Python trait” (Neale, 2001b, p. 64). From dead parrots to the mosquito hunters to the All-England Summarize Proust Competition, *Flying Circus* is known for its absurdity.

*Flying Circus* established the Monty Python troupe as a cultural phenomenon in the history of media known for their absurd, carnivalesque – classified as chaotic or excessive – humor (Landy, 2005; Neale, 2001b). The unconventional manner in which the sketches of *Flying Circus* violated genre expectations of sketch comedy established an audience so that Monty Python could continue on to write and act in four feature films – one of which, *And Now for
*Something Completely Different* (1972), is a feature-length compilation of sketches from *Flying Circus* – because the style was associated with the Python group.

*Flying Circus* employed absurdist humor by “[unsettling] the conventional and expected characteristics of [television] genres” (Landy, 2005, p. 49). The Pythonic form of humor and violation of genre expectations invites the reexamination of comedic typologies. In other words, *Flying Circus* “[combined references to philosophers and obscure historic events] with a complex array of comic techniques and organizational features [to appeal] in particular to a generation of young, often university-educated audiences, willing to make a cult of its absurdities” (Neale, 2001b, p. 64). As with most “cult-comedy” programs, *Flying Circus* has a dedicated following. Audiences are not only introduced to memorable dialogue and characters, but to also a television program which was one of “the first to explore (and to parody) the forms and conventions of broadcast TV” (Neale, 2001c, p. 63).

**Overview/Research Questions**

This study is looking specifically at the violation of expectations of generic form for the purposes of humor. The philosopher Immanuel Kant declared laughter was “an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (as cited in Edwards, 1921, p. 153). The humor in *Flying Circus* is constructed though a violation of these strained expectations of sketch comedy’s genre. Arranged thematically in chapter two and chronologically – or by episode – in chapter three, the remainder of this study is an analysis of seven *Flying Circus* episodes in terms of content and social satire (chapter two) and in-depth micro elements that violate generic expectations of through absurdity (chapter three). The study will conclude with a chapter that will address the research questions listed below in addition to returning to Mittell’s (2001) five practices of genre analysis (see pp. 13-14).
It is through the resistance to generic expectations of what is commonly classified as sketch comedy – for example, going four seasons with only one punch line – that the members of Monty Python have established themselves as important to the study of humor in communication. While examining the seven episodes I have selected from the first three seasons of *Flying Circus* I will address and answer four multi-part research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does *Flying Circus* violate generic expectations of sketch comedy?

RQ2: To what extent is absurdity used to satirize or mock symbols of authority and Britishness in *Flying Circus*?

RQ3a: To what extent does television as a medium motivate the function of humor in *Flying Circus*?

RQ3b: To what extent do micro-elements and editing techniques (e.g., animation, interrupting and/or abandoning sketches, repetition, and altering the structure of conventional television episodes) used in *Flying Circus* present a unique interpretation of the communication of humor as absurdity and the violation of expectations?

RQ4: To what extent is *Flying Circus* able to transcend time and culture?

The questions will be address in subsequent chapters in this study.

**Method**

This study will answer the research questions identified above through a generic analysis of seven thirty-minute episodes in their entirety. This analysis looks specifically at the violation of expectations of sketch comedy’s form and genre. The humor in *Flying Circus* is constructed through a violation of expectations. As the series is largely without a punch line or expect climax to any joke, entire episodes should be examined to comment on the unique transitions. Mittell wrote, “Genre is a categorical concept and therefore somewhat transcends specific instances in lieu of sweeping generalizations” (2001, p. 17). Mittell recommends finding a middle-ground
amongst the specificity/generality tension in television genre studies. In that respect, the generic analysis of *Flying Circus* will lend itself to some genre criticism without limiting itself to only attempting to define a genre that is dynamic in nature.

As Bonnie Dow wrote, “My experience with the text itself governs the approach I will take to it, reflecting the belief that working out from a particular (rather than applying ready-formed analytical systems) gets critics closer to the subject before deciding which analytical systems are appropriate and with what limitations” (1996, p. 22). This concept has guided the selection of data. Thinking specifically about memorable sketches and characters that speak specifically to a violation of expectations, and often times reinforced by YouTube hits, seven episodes of *Flying Circus* from the first three seasons (season four is without John Cleese and therefore the Monty Python troupe is incomplete) will be the object of analysis for this study (see Table 2). In order to ground the seven episodes with historical context, passages from Michael Palin’s diary he kept during the filming and writing of *Flying Circus* will be included.

**Table 2: List of Episodes Examined**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EPISODE</th>
<th>SEASON (YEAR)</th>
<th>SKETCHES INCLUDE:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Full Frontal Nudity”</td>
<td>One (1969)</td>
<td>Scared Soldier, Dead Parrot, Hell’s Grannies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Naked Ant”</td>
<td>One (1970)</td>
<td>Falling From Building, Mr. Hitler, Upper-class Twit of Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Spam”</td>
<td>Two (1970)</td>
<td>Dirty Hungarian Phrasebook, Ypres 1914, Spam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Money Programme”</td>
<td>Three (1972)</td>
<td>The Money Song, Argument Clinic, Erizabeth L</td>
</tr>
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Chapter Two: Historical Context and Social Satire

Before he died in 1989, Graham Chapman told an American interviewer that the main difference he saw between British comedy and American comedy was that American comedy included a long history of stand-up with “joke tellers” and lots of “one-liners” (Chapman, 2006a). Although British comedy and American comedy have different roots, _Flying Circus_ was successful in crossing cultural borders, gaining a following outside of just Britain, something that several shows that predated _Flying Circus_ were unable to do. This chapter explores contextual and cultural dimensions of _Flying Circus_ and its predecessors to provide a contextual understanding of _Flying Circus_. Parts of this chapter will explore the evolution of British comedy as influences that would impact the comedy of _Flying Circus_.

To begin, this chapter will position _Flying Circus_ in its historical context and provide a background of the members and how they came to create a television series that violated nearly all of the sketch comedy generic expectations. The contextual description is then followed by an in-depth background of how the members of Monty Python came to establish themselves and their program as memorable cultural artifacts. Finally, this chapter examines symbols of authority that _Flying Circus_ often satirized. This chapter uses examples from each of the seven episodes.

*Monty Python in Historical Context: Pre-Python*

When the Monty Python troupe petitioned the BBC for their own comedy show in early 1969, they did not know exactly what they wanted their television program to be about; all they did know was that they wanted it to be funny (*Life of Python*, 1999). They were inspired not only by their earlier work on BBC shows such as _The Frost Report, At Last the 1948 Show_, and _Do Not Adjust Your Set_, but also earlier comedy programs both on television (e.g., _That Was the Week That Was_) and radio (e.g., _The Goon Show_). In January 1955, when Michael Palin was
eleven, he recorded enjoying what would become a strong influence for all of the Pythons in his diary when he wrote “Tuesday the 18th [...] Listened to The Goon Show” (Palin, 2006, p. xix).

*Flying Circus* does not represent typical “alternative comedy.” According to Wagg, “In the proto-punk culture of ‘alternative’ comedy, the Monty Python team represented Oxbridge, privilege and the often-invoked ‘middle class wanker’” (1996, p. 235). In other words, the members of Monty Python were regarded as too elite by “alternative” comics, including veteran of *The Goon Show* Spike Milligan, due to their university educations. Alternative comedy in Great Britain was founded on “a classic liberal dilemma: freedom of speech versus the dismantlement of prejudice” (Wagg, 1996, p. 238). In other words, for alternative comedians – the majority of whom were left-wing – found themselves in a conservative government leading into the 1960s. The conservative politicians were regarded as intruding in the lives of ordinary people, and these politicians were using the BBC and public addresses to do so (Wagg, 1992). Alternative comedy set the stage for the “satire boom” that began in post-war Britain, especially once television became an important artifact of the home in the late-1950s. From the “satire boom,” *Flying Circus* evolved from a long history of BBC satire and comedy.

Before television, satire – as defined in chapter one (p. 4) as a literary style that holds vices, follies, stupidities, abuses, etc. up to ridicule and contempt – played a role on the radio. On the BBC, satire evolved from the radio show *The Goon Show* (1951-1960) to the comedies of Oxbridge players beginning in the early-1960s. The members of *The Goon Show* – Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers, and Harry Secombe – were all “from lower-middle-class backgrounds and lacked the elite university education which would spawn so many ‘satirical’ comedians in later years. [...] Not only was *The Goon Show* subversive of adult conventions (grown men behaving like children), it was also, some thought, blatantly disrespectful to authority” (Wagg, 1992, p. 256). Following *The Goon Show*, programs on the BBC began to move towards satire.
Politicians and others had a public life. Satire – defined in British culture as “the ridicule of prevailing vices and their perpetrators” (Wagg, 1992, p. 255) – became prevalent on television in the medium’s early years, illustrated in a revue called The Last Laugh (1959). Demonstrating high levels of anger as well as political awareness, The Last Laugh positioned itself as a model for those shows that would follow. Wagg writes, “It is […] this anger, which seems to be most important in the understanding of this revue [The Last Laugh] and much of the ‘undergraduate humour’ [including Flying Circus] that has followed it” (1992, p. 258).

Wagg’s analysis of satire as seen in the post-war era in Britain includes the use of ridicule – a form of superiority humor because it makes fun of person or institution through contempt – as used in entertainment media. Wagg writes:

Peter Cook, the principal writer on The Last Laugh and the most prominent Cambridge comedian of the time, joined with a Cambridge graduate, Jonathan Miller, and two Oxford University writer-performers, Alan Bennett and Dudley Moore, to perform a show of sketches on the fringe of the Edinburgh Festival in 1960. This show, entitled Beyond the Fringe, marked the entry of “satire” into popular consciousness. (1992, p. 259)

It was Beyond the Fringe (1960) that made way for the approach to performance taken by the Monty Python troupe in Flying Circus because media culture was merging with political culture as seen by sketches that had performers impersonating politicians. University revues “paved the way for the satire boom” (Wilmut, 1980, p. xviii). However, these satire godfathers like Peter Cook and Jonathan Miller did not connect their work to “satire.” The British press associated the work with satire, yet in terms of class and status, the members of university revues were university educated; they associated satire as a comedic form with the members of The Goon Show along with other comics who never attended university. Beyond the Fringe and The Last
Laugh wrote from a perspective of evaluating humor in terms of what was happening in society (Wilmut, 1980). The portrayal of then-Prime Minister Macmillan was a direct mockery of the man who had told the United Kingdom public that they had “never had it so good” as they “had it” under a Conservative government from 1951-1964.

Satire’s main concern is not to generate laughter. Instead, satire exists primarily as a mode of attacking situations through irony, sarcasm, etc. (Wilmut, 1980). Humor is often used to express a given stand-point, however a political agenda often undermines all humor in satire. A broad category of comedy, satire encompasses a desire to ridicule a range of institutions and/or people. While comedy revues such as Beyond the Fringe and The Last Laugh intended to be funny by shocking audiences with a “recognition of how absurd things are” (Wilmut, 1980, p. 17), when satire first appeared on British television in programs such as That Was the Week that Was (1962-1963) – also known as TW3 – performers had a “definite standpoint [and they wished] to question the established order, and to ridicule what they saw as folly, they regarded humour as only one of a number of weapons, albeit the most important one” (Wilmut, 1980, p. 53).

Satire in Britain in the early 1960s was political in nature as a reaction to the politics of Britain. Prior to the 1964 election, the Conservative party had been in power since 1951. Harold Macmillan – the leader of the conservative party – had been Prime Minister since 1957 (Clarke, 2004; Wilmut, 1980). Wilmut claimed that Beyond the Fringe – particularly Peter Cook’s caricature of Macmillan – “prepared the public for satire” (1980, p. 53). Members of the middle-class who had studied at elite universities were making fun of political figures. This lampooning of politicians was no longer an act committed only by the working class who were often portrayed in British films as the “angry young man” during the 1960s.

Starring David Frost, TW3 (1962-1963) was highly topical. By the time Roger Wilmut wrote From Fringe to Flying Circus in 1980, he felt that many of the Frost/Booker sketches from
the program had “lost their sparkle” (p. 62). In other words, with the passage of time, some sketches from TW3 were no longer as amusing to an audience – both British and universal. However, Flying Circus’ comedy – both in style and the figures selected for satire – allowed the comedy troupe’s popularity to extend beyond 1974 because it was not as predominantly topical.

The BBC had a policy of “no controversy” beginning even before television came along. When Sir Hugh Greene became Director-General in 1960, he brought with him “a liberal-minded outlook which accorded well with the BBC’s increasing break away from the cozy image of the 1950s. In its earlier days, the BBC had steered very clear of any involvement in politics – it is, of course, required by its charter to be absolutely impartial” (Wilm, 1980, p. 57). Flying Circus was one of the last programs to benefit from Sir Greene’s more liberal policies. Following his retirement in 1969, the BBC had to yield more airtime to politicians with on-air political party broadcasts, many of which are mocked in Flying Circus.

The year 1969 would bring together a group that actor Steve Martin called in 1989, “the best British import since the Beatles” (Parrot Sketch Not Included: Twenty Years of Python, 1989) when two of the staff writers from TW3 – Graham Chapman and John Cleese – were offered the opportunity to write their own program by Sir Hugh Carleton Greene.

Python’s Background

Upon receiving the offer to have his own comedy program in 1969 with Chapman for the BBC, Cleese invited Michael Palin and his writing partner, Terry Jones, to be a part of the show. Michael and Terry both relayed the offer to Eric Idle, with whom the two of them worked on Do Not Adjust Your Set (1967-1969). Idle had enjoyed the animations American-born Terry Gilliam did for Do Not Adjust Your Set, so he insisted that Gilliam round out their comedy troupe. Gilliam’s “style [of animation is] suggestive of Salvador Dali with a migraine” (Wilm, 1980, p. 204). Although the other four were unsure at first how they felt about “the American with the
huge coat” as Terry Jones called Gilliam (Life of Python, 1999), Monty Python made history in a way that none of the six had expected by producing a “comedy show without using a punch-line” (Lennon, 2009, p. 50).

With the exception of Gilliam, who was educated in the United States, the members of Monty Python were educated at either Cambridge (John Cleese, Graham Chapman, and Eric Idle) or Oxford (Terry Jones and Michael Palin) Universities. Oxford and Cambridge – or, as sometimes combined by cultural studies authors as “Oxbridge” – are both notable institutions of Britain. Until the mid-1960’s, they were the main universities in Britain; if a member of the population was qualified and could afford to attend college, they went to Oxford or Cambridge (Clarke, 2004). While in school in the early-to-mid-1960s, the British members of Monty Python were members of Cambridge Circus and the Footlights Club, the same revues that Python’s university-educated predecessors (e.g., Peter Cook) were members of. In Britain, undergraduate comedy was nearly as notable as the institutions themselves. Membership in Cambridge Circus and the Footlights Club gave undergraduate comedians an audience ranging from David Frost to even the Queen.

Although the members of Monty Python had studied different subjects while in school – medicine, law, history, political science, and English (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009; Life of Python, 1999) – one very important similarity existed: a similar sense of humor derived from a closely similar upbringing. Palin said, “What binds Python together is a similar sense of humor, a general consensus about what is funny. If you’d written something that appealed to the group sense of humor, that would go [in the show]. That’s why we worked well as a group, certainly you didn’t have to explain what was funny” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 96). In terms of humor, Chapman, Cleese, Gilliam, Idle, Jones, and Palin all shared an absurdist point of view, and therefore they all enjoyed the same function of humor: incongruity. Chapman attributed that
shared sense of humor as to why *Flying Circus* found success outside of Britain. In 1988, he told a reporter, “As far as we were concerned almost everywhere around the world, there seems to be a group of people who like the surreal, which is fortunate for us. We could crossover and find a similar kind of following here [in the United States]” (Chapman, 2006a). In spite of referring to the type of humor that Monty Python represents as British humor, it can in fact be understood by anyone who appreciates a world of satire and of fantastic and off-the-wall comments. As children of the middle class, the members of Monty Python saw their parents’ generation as boring and hurt by society’s conventions and expectations. They did not want to grow up to be accountants, and for that reason they often lampooned – or mocked – these conventionally boring characters in *Flying Circus*.

The members of Monty Python were among the first generation of comedy writers to go straight from university to working in television. While in school, “academic pursuits took second place to writing comedy and being funny” (*Life of Python*, 1999). Chapman had reportedly had a difficult time deciding whether to pursue comedy or medicine. Part of the deciding factor for him was when the Queen told him that he “must travel” to New York with the other members of Cambridge Circus (*Graham Chapman’s Personal Best*, 2005; Idle, 2009; *Life of Python*, 1999). While Chapman did well in school and apart from the alcoholism might have made a fine doctor, he regarded the Queen’s suggestion to travel to mean that he should take full advantage of comedy; his decision was made. Cleese recalls Chapman meeting with the Queen as “the only time he ever behaved himself […] and what she told him meant a lot to him” (*Graham Chapman’s Personal Best*, 2005). With academia behind them upon their graduation from respectable British universities – except Gilliam, an alumna of Occidental College in Los Angeles – upon graduating from Oxford and Cambridge, the members of Monty Python began working
for television personality – and former Cambridge student – David Frost, who had been working on BBC television since 1961.

Throughout the 1960s, the six members of Monty Python worked on a variety of television shows. Palin, Jones, Idle, and Gilliam – who were working on Do Not Adjust Your Set – were attracting an adult audience to what was originally a kid’s show. As a result, in early-1969, Thames television – an independent television channel with a smaller number of studios than the BBC – offered the four of them a chance to do their own show; however, the condition was that the men would have to wait eighteen months for a television studio to become available. Meanwhile, Cleese – who was the first of the Pythons to become “hugely famous on television” (Life of Python, 1999) thanks to his work on The Frost Report – was offered the chance to develop a television show on BBC with Chapman, with whom he had been writing since 1961 when the two were at Cambridge. Cleese and Chapman had completed At Last the 1948 Show, and now Cleese wanted to work with Michael Palin because he remembered him fondly from The Frost Report. Years later, Idle explained, “John wanted to work with Mike. Everyone wanted to work with Mike” (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009). Known by many fans as “The Nice Python,” Palin had established a reputation for niceness in addition to his strength as an actor and a writer. Cleese and Chapman wanted to convince Palin and the others to be a part of their BBC television show, hoping that the ability to begin filming immediately would entice the others away from a contract with Thames Television. In fact, for Gilliam, Palin, Idle, and Jones, being offered the opportunity to begin working on a television show for the BBC was far more intriguing than waiting eighteen months for a television studio on an independent television channel.

The meeting with Michael Mills, the head of Light Entertainment for the BBC, in May 1969 was, as Cleese believed, the “worst interview that anyone, that any group, has ever done”
(Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009). The show did not have a title and the six members of the comedy troupe did not know if they were going to have music or guest appearances. No one knew what Flying Circus was going to be about. However, in a decision that would not be made today when television executives outnumber the talent and are not “just waiting for five o’clock to roll around so that they could go to the pub,” Mills stood up and said, “Well, I’ll give you thirteen shows, but that’s all” (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009; Dawidziak, 2009; Life of Python, 1999; Morgan, 1999; Palin, 2006). In another country and another time, six men would never be given that much freedom, least of all their own show, if they had walked in to a meeting and could not articulate a name for their television program. However, in Britain in 1969, the heads of the BBC left a good deal of the running and managing of a television show up to the performers themselves.

In 2009, Cleveland, Ohio television critic Mark Dawidziak explained the 1969 meeting as “a scene that could have been written for a Monty Python sketch.” All the same, after Mills “shook an admonishing finger at the six young men in his office,” Chapman, Cleese, Idle, Jones, Palin, and Gilliam found themselves in possession of their own television show; they just did not know what to do with it. In that same year, it would be Q5, a BBC-2 program created by and starring a comedian that the members of Monty Python – except for Gilliam – had admired while they were “growing up and listening to the Goons” (Life of Python, 1999) that would establish a direction that Flying Circus would take. In June 1969, filming for the first season of Flying Circus began, and by the time the first episode aired in October, the members of Monty Python felt – as Cleese said – “enabled to go a little bit further [in terms of surreal and fantastic content] than we would otherwise have gone” (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009).

Upon seeing Milligan’s series Q5 (1969, 1975, 1978-1980), the members of Monty Python – who now had permission to do thirteen episodes, but still no title – realized that with
Milligan paving the way for the violation of sketch comedy clichés, they could go even further with the help of Gilliam’s animations. Cleese made the analogy, “dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants” (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009) to explain how Milligan allowed the members of Monty Python to build upon the violations in Q5 in Flying Circus. For Gilliam, who viewed punch-lines as the weakest aspect of a sketch (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009), he – and the others – were inspired by Milligan’s program because for the first time they were seeing a television show where sketches would be interrupted and abandoned. Comedy no longer needed to be prescriptive or formulaic.

Directed by Ian MacNaughton – who also directed most of the Flying Circus episodes – Q5 ran for five seasons between 1969 and 1980 on the BBC. The first season was admired by the members of Monty Python, who were all already Spike Milligan fans, remembering him fondly from The Goon Show. The members of Monty Python liked Milligan’s 1969 sketch about a race where the runners remained completely still and were filmed moving around a track only in post-production editing. In the sketch, a starter’s gun was fired and the audience watched as four men rounded a track without any evidence of the human motor skills. Jones said that Q5 made him realize that he [and all other television comedy writers] “had been writing clichés” (Life of Python, 1999). For that reason, when Cleese, Chapman, Idle, Gilliam, Jones, and Palin prepared to write and film the first season of Flying Circus in 1969, they wanted to mirror Milligan’s style. Although the situations and content was weird, they found it funny and were excited by the novelty of the violation of generic conventions.

In his diary on January 14, 1970, Michael Palin wrote, “Jimmy Thomas of the Daily Express attacked Frost on Sunday for not realizing that Monty Python had changed humour and brought it forward when Frost was trying to put it back” (2006, p. 13). Although during the process of writing the series, the members of Monty Python did not view Flying Circus as “a
living legend, pushing back the barriers of comedy” (Palin, 2006, p. 12) because to them it was just an employment opportunity, the forty years that have passed since the airing of the first episode – entitled “Whither Canada?” – position Flying Circus as a cultural commodity, meaning an important series in the overall study of television.

Social Satire

Co-creator of The Office (2001-2003), Steve Merchant, said, “Everybody was fair game in Monty Python’s satire” (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009). No one group was able to opt out and avoid being mocked and ridiculed. Flying Circus combined satire and absurdity by ridiculing others for taking themselves too seriously. Flying Circus mocked authority and the establishment by often implying a level of madness. Policemen, accountants, the upper-class – nearly every group or institution – were insane and “out of [their] tiny little minds,” as far as Flying Circus was concerned. British comedian and writer Steve Coogan said, “[On Flying Circus,] you could say things that you wouldn’t be otherwise able to say. […] If you could make people laugh that was your get-out-of-jail-free card” (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009). While initially the “studio audience was in shock” (Life of Python, 1999) during the filming of the first shows, Idle believed that the show had grown on people by the end of the first thirteen episodes that made up the first season (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009). In other words, Flying Circus was making people laugh, and it was largely making people laugh because the format violated expectations (see chapter three) and because of the presentation of authority and conventions as symbols that were not to be aspired to.

In the seven episodes of Flying Circus selected for analysis, the members of Monty Python satirized British norms, institutions, and figures of authority. Flying Circus presented a broader social critique, and was not as concerned with topical issues of the moment. The satire movement in Britain began with The Goon Show on the radio and carried over to television in the
1960s and 1970s was treated differently on *Flying Circus* because the mockery and satire found in *Flying Circus* was not specific to any one time period. Overall, they mocked characteristics of authority instead of specific individuals. The members of Monty Python mocked institutions, rather than specific individuals. Palin called the content of the program a “reaction against a rather stifling world. It was not necessarily oppressive. It didn’t hurt us. It wasn’t unkind. It was just very, very conventional” (as cited in Wagg, 1992, p. 269). By critiquing elements of authority, the members of Monty Python were able to react against such a conventional world where institutions – from the police to the BBC – presented a boring, constrained life for the comedians who made up the comedy troupe, Monty Python.

Among the symbols of authority mocked in the programs were the BBC, the aristocracy, police officers and the military, religion, and the bureaucracy and legislation of the British government. The program “represents a social critique and is not narrowly concerned with politics of politicians” (Wagg, 1992, p. 269). What follows is a thematic description of *Flying Circus'* use of absurdity to satirize and ridicule symbols of authority and Britishness as a means to generate laughter in the seven episodes selected for analysis.

The BBC

In Britain, television is a property of the British government. However, in 1969, the members of Monty Python were given a lot of freedom as one of the last shows on BBC during this time to benefit from Sir Hugh Greene’s liberal-minded influence. The success of the first season is largely a result of the freedom the BBC gave the members of Monty Python. In programs that pre-dated *Flying Circus* that the members of the comedy troupe had written for, content that was seen as “too surreal or weird” would be objected to; David Frost made sure that bizarre and outrageously fantastic content did not make it into the finished script. *TW3* and *The Frost Report* each wanted to largely maintain a status quo in terms of television form. While
content-wise they featured political unrest, typically from the left, the sketches still all used punch-lines and jokes. The programs would allow for some absurdity so long as generic conventions of sketch comedy programs – the punch-lines (the final line of a joke or gag used to motivate laughter), the black-outs (fading to black at the end of each sketch), the double-act (sketches consisting of two performers bantering back-and-forth) – still largely remained. In 1969, when Monty Python was given thirteen episodes to do with as they pleased, the members of the troupe were looking forward to finally being able to write and perform any content they pleased during the first seasons keeping in mind that as Cleese once said, “The best parodies of television are done on television” (as cited in Wilmut, 1980, p. 202).

The establishment target that Flying Circus most often challenged was the BBC. The spinning globe, the symbol for BBC-1, was used often in episodes as an announcer – usually John Cleese – would introduce ridiculous television programs that were preparing to appear next on the channel. While for the first two seasons, the content of Flying Circus went unmodified, the popularity of the program encouraged the executives at the BBC to take notice, and they began making objections. Producers who worked at the BBC in Light Entertainment became involved in Flying Circus, to do their best to monitor the content of the show as the program continued past the first two seasons. At first, the BBC did not have any idea what the show was going to be. Therefore, the members of Monty Python were allowed a lot of freedom. Wilmut (1980) explained that when Flying Circus was transmitted, the heads of Light Entertainment at the BBC did not want the show to continue. However, due to the positive reaction from the press and the viewers, BBC allowed Monty Python to continue doing Flying Circus. For Graham Chapman, the justification for the initial freedom was because the BBC was not sure what the program was going to be when the members of Monty Python first met with them. He said, “I think if the authorities had been aware of what we wanted to do right from the beginning we would never
have been allowed to do the programme” (as cited in Wilmot, 1980, p. 206). In 1969, Light Entertainment at the BBC was run by a small number of executives. The time period worked in Monty Python’s favor because by the time BBC took significant notice of the script content before the episode was broadcast, *Flying Circus* was already highly popular. In 1998, Gilliam said that no one would have that much freedom and a station would never give six guys their own show before they even have a title for the series (*Monty Python Live in Aspen*, 1998).

The BBC is a recognized institution of authority. While Flying Circus did not react to authority in the same manner of more subversive television programs like *Not So Much a Program* (1964) because they did not impersonate and disguise actual politicians and people (with Hitler, Himmler, and Von Ribbentrop and certain BBC sports commentators being an exception), they did mock British television and the BBC. In later years, the BBC was happy to take credit and responsibility for *Flying Circus*. However, at the time, the BBC had issues with Monty Python and the content of *Flying Circus*. In 1988, Chapman recalled, “They [the BBC] were never very keen on us [the group] anyway” (2006c). While *Flying Circus* did extend beyond thirteen episodes because of its popularity, the BBC fought with the members of Monty Python regarding appropriateness of episode content all the way. Monty Python fought back by openly mocking British television and the Establishment in their program.

In several of the seven episodes analyzed, specific references to the BBC were made by characters. The sketch at the end of “The Naked Ant” in which Chapman fell through the earth’s crust in the middle of a political announcement is an example of this specific commentary. When Idle’s character asks, “What length of BBC rope will we be likely to need?” to the minister that had fallen through the crust, BBC studios are being cited as such a location where bizarre catastrophes are likely to happen. Yet, at the same time, the employees of the BBC are also unsure about how to behave in certain situations. In *Flying Circus*, the BBC is often ill-prepared.
and features fast-talking television anchors who are presented as two-dimensional and not knowledgeable.

In some situations, *Flying Circus* represents BBC anchors as being fast-talking, sharply-dressed men with smarmy grins like Palin’s recurring television presenter in “The Naked Ant.” In other episodes, BBC anchors are unprofessional, yogurt-eating, stumbling characters as portrayed by Eric Idle in “Full Frontal Nudity.” Meanwhile, the opening of “Archaeology Today” in the second season of *Flying Circus* makes reference to specific icons of BBC, particularly sports commentator David Coleman who famously mispronounced names and misused words leading to a voice over – done by Eric Idle – that characterizes the BBC icon as personifying all the negative traits of television personalities.

*Flying Circus* mocks an entire culture of BBC icons during the opening bit of “Archaeology Today.” The first words that are spoken in the episode is Idle saying, in a voice-over, “Here is a preview of some of the programmes you’ll be able to see coming shortly to BBC television.” Idle introduces names recognizable to the British audience to be appearing on false shows.

The names Eric Idle uses in his monologue are cultural icons and are in most cases, not recognized outside of the United Kingdom. Many of them are BBC icons. Peter West was known as a BBC sports commentator. Brian Johnston was a cricket commentator. E. W. Swanton was also a cricket commentator, and he served as a broadcaster on BBC radio for thirty years before retiring in the 1970s. Brian Close was a professional cricket player. John Galsworthy was an English novelist and playwright – although he never wrote a piece entitled “Snooker My Way,” as Idle suggests in the “Trailer” sketch. Galsworthy won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1932; as a result the members of Monty Python viewed Galsworthy as a member of the elite and the “too serious.” Nyree Dawn Porter was a New Zealand-born actress of stage, television and film.
Jim Laker was a professional cricketer. Tony Jacklin was a professional English golfer. Lastly, David Coleman was another BBC icon as a TV sports commentator who worked for the BBC for more than forty years. During his time on air, he often mispronounced names and would make senseless comments while sprouting clichés, hence Idle saying, “For those who don’t like television there’s David Coleman.” Coleman was famously inept. In a way, he was a disgrace to television personalities who wished to be taken seriously.

Without knowing names, the rhetoric and delivery can be examined as artifacts of Flying Circus mocking television’s conventions and, at times, its hypocrisy. The voice over promises variety at the beginning; however, each scenario and program continued to deal with sports. The phrase, “There’ll be sport” is repeated several times throughout. A former English major, Idle was fond of words, and therefore his writing – this monologue was written by him – was often wordy with the majority of the humor lying in linguistics and not as strongly in the visual image. Flying Circus mocked broadcast television in “Trailer” by juxtaposing BBC icons – most of whom were sport commentators – by introducing them as lead actors in other television genres.

The British audience watching “Archaeology Today” can recognize the signature tune for Grandstand (1958-2007), a BBC sports show immediately following Idle’s voice over. However, the tune stops abruptly and a song all Flying Circus fans – whether they are from Britain or not – begins to play: Sousa’s “The Liberty Bell.”

As BBC announcers, Idle’s persona was often snarky, Palin played flashy fast-talkers, and Cleese appeared looking very serious and professional, but always in strange locations. In “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body,” Cleese’s character attempts to set up the sketch by fulfilling the role of a BBC announcer whose one task is to introduce film segments. Over the stock footage of battleships, Cleese says, “There have been many stirring tales told of the sea and also some fairly uninteresting ones only marginally connected with it, like this one. Sorry, this
isn’t a very good announcement.” Monty Python often satirized the role of the television announcer. John Cleese was able to do that successfully. Palin said, “Terry and I could never play authority figures, especially not as well as John or Graham. […] We were very lucky in that respect, I mean, to have people who looked like that and meanwhile doing very silly things” (Life of Python, 1999). Cleese violates expectations by acknowledging that his introduction is “not very good,” something that no BBC announcer would ever do.

Around the time the series was reaching its conclusion in November of 1974, Palin wrote in his diary, “We are faced with an important decision. Do we let the BBC change Python into a soft, inoffensive half-hour of pap, or do we fight to keep its teeth, its offensiveness, its naughtiness? Do we have to conform or disappear?” (Palin, 2006, p. 193). In “The Money Programme,” the BBC’s tendency toward censorship was explicitly commented on when Idle's voice is heard over the image of the BBC’s globe symbol that the corporation adapted. Idle says, “The BBC would like to announce that the next scene is not suitable for family viewing.” He describes the content of the scene that is not being shown. The content includes violence and sexual images. As a BBC announcer, Idle instead offers to show a scene “from a repeat of ‘Gardening Club’ [from] 1958.” However, as a suggestion that BBC censors are not actually performing a worthy duty, the “Gardening Club” scene becomes an orgy, complete with nude women, nuns, Vikings, a pantomime goose, and other assorted characters.

Chapman (2006c) believed that the BBC never cared for the six of them; however, because the show was extremely popular, the BBC was reluctant to cancel it. Instead, as the BBC fought with the members of Monty Python over content and censorship as the program continued (see chapter three, p. 178), Flying Circus episodes show Monty Python staging its own attack of satire upon the institution and BBC icons. The comedy troupe mocked the BBC by juxtaposing recognizable symbols and icons, such as the revolving globe, with absurd content.
The Upper-Class/Aristocracy

Leading up to the 1970s, socioeconomic class played a significant role in British education. Clarke writes, “In Britain – England worse than Wales or Scotland – education remained solidly class-bound” (2004, p. 284). For the members of Monty Python, who were sons of the middle class with professional parents, this meant that following World War II, they were among a generation where three out of every five children completed a grammar-school education, benefiting greatly from the Butler Act.

While other British alternative comics regarded the members of Monty Python as being elite because they were university-educated, the troupe was actually made up of six middle-class and lower-middle-class men: they were not as spoiled and elite as others might be tempted to believe. In addition, they were not against mocking the upper-classes through ridicule and/or exaggerated absurdity. The power awarded to the aristocracy was an example of old norms that did not make any sense to Monty Python. Therefore, in Flying Circus they often mocked members of the aristocracy, portraying them as highly uneducated and out-of-touch with the norms of society. The most prevalent case of this attack of the aristocracy is the “Upper-Class Twit of the Year Competition” in the episode, “The Naked Ant.” In the sketch, the members of Monty Python satirized the aristocracy by questioning how well-bred and gentlemanly – important attributes for the British upper-classes – could a group of grown men be if one of them happens to have a tree for a best friend while another is used as wastepaper basket by his father.

The obstacles – such as jumping over matchboxes, waking up the neighbor, insulting the butler, etc. – in the “Upper Class Twit of the Year” sketch not only are a mockery and a parody of the conventions of sporting competitions, but they also satirize upper class Britons – those who were not only born into wealth, but are part of wealthy families and thus entitles to a life of privilege because of their name alone. Growing up in the middle class, the British members of
Monty Python – even the Minnesota native, Gilliam, was born into a middle class family – were aware of the class system. Those with money were favored. When Cleese – along with Chapman – wrote the sketch, they were seeking mild revenge on a group of pub-goers near Cleese’s London home with Connie Booth – his first wife – who were all sons of the upper class and did not have to work, therefore they were loud and “would simply behave like idiots” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 53) as John Cleese recalled nearly thirty years later.

By analyzing the account given by the commentator as a narration to the behavior of the twits, the members of Monty Python satirized the upper class in a culture where “anger is not easily expressed” (Cleese: as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 263). Before the start of the surreal race, the commentator goes down the line introducing each competitor. Each twit looks more inbred and moronic than the last until finally reaching Oliver St. John-Mollusc – played by Chapman – who is “thought to be this year’s outstanding twit” whose fixed expression is of an overgrown man who was dropped on his head too often as a young child. As lineage is an important consideration for those who are members of the upper class, the commentator – Cleese as a voice-over – introduces each twit with a “Pythonic” twist on their lineage and qualifications:

Well the competitors will be off in a moment so let me just identify them for you. (Close-up of the competitors.) Vivian Smith-Smythe-Smith [Eric Idle] has an O-level in chemohygiene. Simon-Zinc-Trumpet-Harris, [Terry Jones] married to a very attractive table lamp. Nigel Incubator-Jones, [John Cleese] his best friend is a tree, and in his spare time he’s a stockbroker. Gervaise Brook-Hampster [Michael Palin] is in the Guards, and his father uses him as a wastepaper basket. And finally Oliver St. John-Mollusc, Harrow and the Guards, thought by many to be this year’s outstanding twit.

The British audience, especially those from the London area, will recognize the name of the Harrow School. Still in use today, the all-male school breeds wealthy, young British men to
become distinguished and honorable members of the community. The distinguished headmaster of the Harrow School would not be pleased by Chapman’s representation of a former Harrow pupil in the sketch especially as the school boasts that seven former Prime Ministers – including Winston Churchill and Robert Peel – are Harrow alumni on the Harrow School’s web site [http://www.harrowschool.org.uk].

In “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body,” Palin as Inspector Muffin makes the assumption that the family is upper-class and as a result, verbally attacks Chapman’s character for seeming too elite. Muffin criticizes Chapman’s character for being “too posh” multiple times during the sketch:

**Son:** Any clues?

**Muffin:** Any what?

**Son:** Any evidence as to who did it?

**Muffin (sarcastically):** Any clues, eh? Oh, we don’t talk half posh, don’t we? I suppose you say ‘ehnvelope’ and ‘larngerie’ and ‘sarnwiches on the settee!’

Unlike the “Upper-class Twit of the Year” sketch where the characters were undesirable upper-class halfwits, in “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body,” any use of “posh” language is indicative of elite, upper-class and therefore undesirable to those characters who are explicitly middle-class. Being university educated, the members of Monty Python were at times viewed as too elite to be counted among a class of satirical British comedians. “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” mimics some of the critique Cleese, Chapman, Idle, Gilliam, Jones, and Palin faced.

*Flying Circus* was the creation of middle-class comics. While not explicitly blaming the upper-classes for having access to a lifestyle that the members of the comedy troupe could not
afford, commentary in the series indicates a less-passive anger. *Flying Circus* satirizes the upper-classes through sarcasm and ridicule.

*Police Officers and the Military*

Monty Python liked to undermine authority figures. In some sketches, this meant stereotypically butch and masculine positions, such as cops and the military, behaved in a manner that was very camp in order to mock the authority figures. In other words, the performance of the members of Monty Python did not fit with society’s norms of these authoritative figures. “Archaeology Today” included the “Poofy Judges” sketch where Palin and Idle initially appear in traditional attire – long robes and wigs – and then end up shocking the audience with a cheeky and very camp exchange between the two. Palin and Idle as the Poofy judges each deliver their lines in a very camp manner. They use expressions like “bang my little gavel!” and “wagged my wig.” In explaining his summing up, Palin – as the second judge – says, “Well, I was quite pleased actually. I was trying to do my butch voice, you know, ‘what the jury must understand…’ and they loved it, you know. I could see the foreman eyeing me.” Palin and Idle converse back and forth in the short sketch, giving the audience a behind-the-scenes look at the real personality of butch authority figures.

In the same season that presented the “Poofy Judges” in “Archaeology Today,” a later episode called “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” has soldiers giving a spirited performance of an army song that includes a kick-line. If Monty Python believed the BBC was too tightly bound by convention, the British army truly deserved to be satirized for being too serious. Edited together with quick cuts and the interviewer providing a short introduction, the soldiers initially appear authoritative and military, but authority and military expectations are quickly undermined by the *Flying Circus* script:

**Voice Over (Cleese):** Attention!
Eight soldiers in two ranks of four. They halt, and start to chant with precision.

Soldiers (chanting): My goodness me, I am in a bad temper today all right, two, three, damn, damn, two, three. I am vexed and ratty. (Shake fists.) Two, three, and hopping mad. (Stamp feet.)

Cut to interviewer.

Interviewer: And next the men of the Second Armoured Division regale us with their famous close order swanning about.

Cut to sergeant with eight soldiers.

Sergeant (Cleese): Squad. Camp it…up!

Soldiers (mincing in unison): Oooh get her! Whoops! I’ve got your number ducky. You couldn’t afford me, dear. Two three. I’d scratch your eyes out. (They begin a kick line.) Don’t come the brigadier bit with us, dear, we all know where you’ve been you military fairy. Whoops! Don’t look now girls the major’s just minced in with that dolly color sergeant, two, three, ooh-ho!

Director of Photography for Monty Python and the Holy Grail, Terry Bedford said in 1999 “Python offended the Establishment in terms of the humor. Throughout that period of time [the 1970s] there was a real tightening of the conservative background. […] I think they were just closing ranks and making sure it didn’t happen again” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 313). Part of this reason is that in Flying Circus Monty Python would continue a form of mockery beyond just one or two segments, as these two spirited chants immediate proceed an animation done by Gilliam that shows three generals in tutus dancing to “The Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy.”

In other sketches from Flying Circus, authority figures – cops and members of the British armed forces – were presented with such lunacy that their behavior elicited criticism from other characters and in the minds of the audience members. In “The Naked Ant,” Terry Jones found
himself unable to report a burglary because he was up against an entire police station filled with cops who could only understand another person if they spoke in silly voices. In the sketch, Cleese required high-pitched shrieks; Chapman needed a person to speak in a very low register; Idle needed to hear words spoken at a quick rate; and somewhere, an entire population of squad car drivers required operatic singing on the police radio. The continuous altering of a character’s voice is not only humorous because of the strange sounds, but it also leads the audience to question precisely how police officers might have become so absurd that their own authority gets called into question:

**Sergeant (Cleese):** I’m still not getting anything…Er, could you try it in a higher register?

**Man (Jones):** What do you mean in a higher register?

**Sergeant:** What?

**Man (in a high-pitched voice):** I wish to report a burglary.

**Sergeant:** Ah! That’s it, hang on a moment. (*He gets out pencil and paper.*) Now a little bit louder.

**Man (louder and higher pitched):** I wish to report a burglary.

**Sergeant:** Report a what?

**Man (by now a ridiculous high-pitched squeak):** Burglary!

**Sergeant:** That’s the exact frequency…now keep it there.

In *Flying Circus*, cops became a target for absurdity and incompetence. The members of Monty Python saw these authority figures as highly boring and conventional. They represented the emotionless stereotype of Englishmen with “stiff upper lips.”

Other episodes have used either incompetence or evasiveness as attributions of authority figures. In “The All-England Summarize Proust Competition,” when Terry Jones as a homely
mother is seeking help for the family’s dying hamster she asks into the phone, “Is this the fire brigade?” Next, Palin – while in uniform – says “No” and puts the phone down. He sits down next to other firemen, one of whom suggests taking the phone off the hook so that it would stop ringing. Like the police officers with the silly voices in “The Naked Ant,” the firemen are having a difficult time completing their job successfully. However, instead of outrageous absurdity, the firemen in “The All-England Summarize Proust Competition” are evasive and wishing to avoid being among characters in emotional peril.

Aside from the avoidance of the fire brigade in the third season, Palin’s Inspector Muffin in “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” is not only abrasive, but overall incompetent and troubled by the English language. First he cannot remember if he is investigating a murder or a burglary – the latter a word he has trouble remembering – and then he faces great difficulty in remembering the word, bank:

**Muffin:** In the band…In the bat…Barclays bat.

**Son (Chapman):** Barclays Bank?

For a character who is supposed to be an inspector, Muffin is increasingly incompetent at his job because of his failure to keep the facts straight. Also he says, “I keep thinking I’ve got Boskovitch cornered and in fact I’m investigating a Burnley.” In *Flying Circus*, authority figures all had an inability to complete the job to societal expectations. This includes their failure to remember precisely what they were investigating.

In *Flying Circus*, no one was stronger at playing lunatic authoritative men than Chapman. The son of a policemen and over six feet tall, Graham Chapman – armed with a desire for infantile lunacy – paraded around in “Full Frontal Nudity” interrupting several sketches and barking out orders to the director because “the program [had gotten] too silly.” As the Colonel, Chapman was only outrageous in his over-the-top reactions to silliness. He marched on to
interrupt the “Hermit” sketch and ushered everyone off the side of a cliff. When faced with the scared soldier, the colonel was quick to break from the expected script:

**Colonel:** Watkins, why did you join the army?

**Watkins:** For the water-skiing and for the travel! Not for the killing, sir. I asked them to put it on my form, sir – no killing.

**Colonel:** Watkins are you a pacifist?

**Watkins:** No, sir. I’m not a pacifist, sir. I’m a coward.

**Colonel:** That’s a very silly line. Sit down.

The colonel expects others to behave in a certain way, and once he makes up his mind that someone is being too silly, he immediately disapproves and steps in. However, because of the Colonel’s persona, he is not presented by Monty Python as a plea for authority. It is in his complete lack of a sense of humor that portrays the military colonel as not admirable. The Colonel is overly serious and even aggressive as he does not easily understand comedy.

Chapman’s Colonel does not have an evolved sense of humor. In the episode, once again fed up with the fun that other characters seem to be having, the Colonel looks directly at the camera and says, “I’ve noticed a tendency for this programme to get rather silly. Now I do my best to keep things moving along, but I’m not having things getting silly. […] Now, nobody likes a good laugh more than I do…except perhaps my wife and some of her friends…oh yes and Captain Johnston. Come to think of it, most people like a good laugh more than I do. But that’s beside the point.” Trying to argue that he is fit to be on a comedy program, the Colonel instead must come to terms that he does not actually possess a sense of humor. However, as a senior officer, Chapman’s Colonel does not acknowledge that perhaps a comedy program is not the best place for someone without a sense of humor. Instead, the Colonel argues that the show needs him because he “keeps the show moving.”
While the Colonel’s lone role in *Flying Circus* is to appear and complain about the direction of the sketches, often an illustration of an authoritative leader without a sense of humor, the same sketch in “Full Frontal Nudity” also presents a mockery the lower-ranks in the British army. The sketch was juxtaposed against World War II army footage that showed young men proud to be fighting what they felt was a purely evil rival. However, Idle as Private Watkins is serving in the army in “unoccupied Britain.” Therefore, Watkins is representative of the differences in generations. The members of Monty Python were all very young during World War II, and by the time they grew up they were in a world where their World War allies – the United States – were fighting in the Vietnam War, a war that Prime Minister Wilson told United States President, Lyndon Johnson, that Britain would not fight in. Meanwhile, in their own country, the Irish Republican Army – or the IRA – was bombing London and Birmingham.

Although “Full Frontal Nudity” predates several of the IRA attacks, for the members of Monty Python, army platoons were no longer the “boy’s club” that was represented by World War I and World War II propaganda such as photographs of young men – many of whom were from the same area of Britain – grinning in fox-holes (Clarke, 2004). As a result, Private Watkins is no longer just a coward, but a representation of all the young men who join the army without truly knowing why they want to be in the military:

**Watkins:** It’s dangerous.

**Colonel:** What?

**Watkins:** There are people with guns out there, sir.

**Colonel:** What?

**Watkins:** Real guns, sir. Not toy ones, sir. Proper ones, sir. They’ve all got ‘em. All of ‘em, sir. And some of ‘em have got tanks.

**Colonel:** Watkins, they are on our side.
**Watkins:** And grenades, sir. And machine guns, sir. So I’d like to leave, sir, before I get killed, please.

**Colonel:** Watkins, you’ve only been in the army a day.

**Watkins:** I know sir, but people get killed. Properly dead, sir. […] A bloke was telling me, if you’re in the army and there’s a war, you have to go and fight.

**Colonel:** That’s true.

**Watkins:** Well, I mean, blimey! I mean if it was a big war somebody could be hurt.

While not a plea for peace – as expected on several generic sketch comedy shows during the 1960s and 1970s – Watkins instead portrays the perspective of a clueless army private because he was not aware of what he was getting into by joining the armed forces.

The episode “Spam” also features the military in one of the sketches. Once again, Chapman plays the senior officer in the “Ypres 1914” sketch. However, the Major is not nearly as combative as the Colonel. What is mocked in the sketch is the behavior of a senior officer during war-time. As noted by the caption, the sketch is meant to take place in a trench during World War I. While Chapman’s character initially appears in the sketch to be brave and noble, what the audience learns about this particular army Major is that he is much too selfish to be representative as a leader upon trying to determine which of the five men in the bunker will have to take their own life because of the limited amount of rations:

**Major:** We’ll draw for it. That’s the way we do things in the army. Sergeant. The straws!

_The sergeant gives him the straws. The major arranges them and hands them round._

**Major:** Right now, the man who gets the shortest straw knows what to do.

_They all take long straws, including the armless padre who takes one in his teeth. The major is left with a tiny straw. A pause._

**Sergeant (Palin):** Looks like you, sir.
Major: Is it? What did we say, the longest straw was it?

Sergeant: No, shortest, sir.

Major: Well we’d better do it again, there’s obviously been a bit of a muddle. *(They do it again with the same result.)* Oh dear. Best of three? *(They go through it again, same thing.)* Right, well I’ve got the shortest straw. So I decide what means we use to decide who’s going to do…to…to…to er, …to do the thing.

The Major attempts bribery, games of rock-paper-scissor, and finally noting that since Cleese’s character has no arms, Chapman says, “All those who don’t want to stay here and shoot themselves raise their arms.” The major’s bravery is merely a façade. While the major had no qualms about asking others to be brave and give their lives so that the others might live, Chapman’s character is overly reluctant to perform the task that he requested of others.

Within the series is “a strong strain of cruelty” *(Wagg, 1992, p. 270)* that is directed at authority figures by performing in a manner that is unbefitting of the position they have. *Flying Circus* did not argue that the military and the police should be disbanded. Instead, what the members of the comedy troupe saw was a world where authority figures were taking themselves too seriously or using their authority to manipulate. In 1987, Cleese said, “The main thing is people’s attitude towards authority. I always felt that authority was not necessarily a bad thing. […] I’m interested in making fun of authority [that is] exercised badly” *(as cited in Wagg, 1992, p. 275).* Expressing a similar opinion, Idle believed that following the success of *Flying Circus*, “it was no longer possible to take any [authority figure or institution] seriously” *(as cited in Wagg, 1992, p. 275).*

Religious Figureheads

Although Cleese, Chapman, Idle, Gilliam, Jones, and Palin were all raised Christian, they each began to disregard their religion early in their lives. Some, like Chapman, felt a strong
aversion to any sort of authority that proclaimed one group was better than another (as cited in Wagg, 1992), others were like Eric Idle, whose pastor had told him and other teenage boys that he did not believe in what he preached (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009). In Flying Circus, the portrayal of religious figureheads was largely as surreal and fantastic personalities that often exhibited lunatic behavior, such as Chapman making strange sound effects and rolling on the floor in a television studio.

Following an “appalling” slice of “strawberry tart without so much rat in it,” the episode “The Money Programme” shows Chapman’s character walking through the door to greet his mother (Jones) and his father (Idle). To them he announces, “There’s a dead bishop on the landing.” Because it is a dead bishop, calling for the police would not suffice. Instead, the three characters needed a Church Policemen in order to handle a case specifically related to a dead clergyman. Palin enters and calls upon to assistance of the almighty – as illustrated by a large cut-out of a human hand – in order to determine, and then arrest, the guilty party.

In “Full Frontal Nudity,” Chapman – as the Colonel – complains that Idle’s hair was too long for his performance as a vicar in the “Hell’s Grannies” sketch, and therefore Chapman’s character implied that the series should not cast actors who do not look like a vicar is “supposed” to; by contrast however, in the following season in “Archaeology Today,” Chapman appears as a vicar hoping to make a plea for sanity while an axe is sticking out of his head. In this case, no character appears in the middle of a tirade and curses the director and crew. Instead, Chapman plays a vicar who behaves as a lunatic.

Palin’s voice introduces Chapman’s character as the Reverend Arthur Belling, a vicar who is prepared to appear on television making a plea for sanity. Audience expectations are that this religious figurehead is about to state that people should be sane and avoid the lunacy often presented in Flying Circus. However, expectations are violated – creating incongruity – when the
camera zooms away from Chapman’s face to reveal that he is sitting in a television studio with an axe sticking out of his head.

Chapman’s plea for sanity is actually a call for people who are insane to save others from their sanity. In other words, sanity is not the optimal human condition. While the axe in the head might be a clue that Chapman is not about the urge the viewing public to be sane, his message becomes explicit when he begins his plea by saying, “There are many people in the country today who, through no fault of their own, are sane.” Throughout several of the episodes religious figures appeared in order to offer the audience guidance. However, it was never a large amount of time before religious figures eventually moved toward absurdity.

Chapman said that he was against any religion that “pretends to know best” (as cited in Wagg, 1992, p. 275). It is for this reason that religious figureheads in Flying Circus did not preach religious rhetoric as often as they demonstrated absurd qualities in their personality. Either by rolling around on the floor of a television studio making strange noises or arresting citizens because a cut-out hand told them to, the mocking of religious figures in Flying Circus would later become the comedy troupe’s largest critique on authority in society in their films.

Bureaucracy and Legislation of the British Government

In the courts, Britons are highly traditional. Even today, lawyers and judges still wear white wigs. Juxtaposed against this traditional appearance of wig- and robe-wearing is the absurdity inherent in Monty Python’s comedy. In “Spam,” as a policeman called to testify, Chapman wants an adjournment due to gastrointestinal issues:

Policeman: Please may I ask for an adjournment, m’lud?

Magistrate (Jones): An adjournment? Certainly not. (The policeman sits down; there is a loud raspberry.) Why on earth didn’t you say why you wanted an adjournment?

Policeman: I didn’t know an acceptable legal phrase, m’lud.
In *Flying Circus*, the members of Monty Python make light of court proceedings, often through burlesque – defined as actions that do not fit within the setting (see chapter one, p. 7) – or grotesque – defined as “fantastically outrageous, ugly, or absurd situations” (Neale, 2001b, p. 64) – humor.

The government had an increasingly prevalent role on television. For Wagg (1992; 1996), this meant that politicians were invading the general public’s home. For episodes in *Flying Circus*, however, this meant that in addition to being able to use man-in-the-street interviews to transition between sketches, the Pythons had a way of making fun of politicians and the political system beyond the lampooning of the political figures themselves. In The style of asking the general population what they think of a politician or a political issue is often used in the name of television journalism. Doing so presents the illusion that democracy and democratic government is for the people by the people. Judging by the personae that the members of Monty Python have taken on for the brief interview segment of “The Naked Ant,” the voting population is often ill-informed, corrupt, or just not making any sense at all:

**Interviewer (Cleese) (voice over):** What do you think of Mr. Hilter’s policies?

**Second Yokel (Chapman):** I don’t like the sound of these ‘ere bocentration bamps.

**First Pepperpot (Idle):** Well I gave him my baby to kiss and he bit it…on the head.

**Stockbroker (Cleese):** Well I think he’d do a lot of good for the Stock Exchange.

**Second Pepperpot (Palin):** No…no…

**Himmler (Palin) (thinly disguised as yokel):** Oh yes Britischer pals he is wunderbar…ful. So.

**Third Pepperpot (Jones):** I think he’s right about the coons, but then I’m a bit mental.

**Gumby (Jones):** I think he’s got beautiful legs.
**Madd (Chapman):** Well speaking as a Conservative candidate, I just drone on and on and on…never letting anyone else get a word in edgeways until I start foaming at the mouth and fall over backwards. (*He foams at the mouth and falls over backwards.*)

While the members of Monty Python did occasionally portray political personae in *Flying Circus,* mockery of the British government generally focused on the bureaucratic nature of the government because they felt that the institution is to blame. However, Chapman as a conservative candidate who drones on in “The Naked Ant” or Jones preparing a language laboratory tape for a politician so they might practice saying that they will not confirm any rumors in “The All-England Summarize Proust Competition,” are examples of political caricatures – or a ludicrous exaggeration of the peculiarities of a person or a thing – in the program. In addition, the likeness of Maudling and Thatcher are both used in “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” in order to suggest that conservative politicians, like Thatcher, have their brain located in their knee.

In “Full Frontal Nudity,” Cleese’s remark about inter-city rail illustrates social satire when he believes himself to be in Ipswich when he wanted to be approximately 250 miles away in Bolton and turns to the camera to say, “That’s inter-city rail for you.” Bolton, part of Lancashire is in Northern England, whereas Ipswich is near London. A universal audience could potentially deduce that Praline, Cleese’s character, is nowhere near where he wants to be because he grumbles and leaves the pet shop to go complain. However, for the British audience, their basic geography skills include distances between British cities, and therefore they better understand the Cleese’s dig at British Inter-city rail systems.

Defined as government with a lot of administrators and petty officials, bureaucracy is satirized in the “Argument Clinic” at the end of “The Money Programme.” Behind each unassuming door is another official who specializes in various forms of treatment. Chapman’s
character hurl abuse at each individual who wanders through the door. Idle leans back with his feet propped up on his desk and vents and complains about small issues. Jones eagerly waits for a person to walk through the doorway just so that he can bash them on the head with a rubber mallet. In room 4B, is Cleese as an arguer, who contradicts Palin’s character instead of arguing to the intellectual standards of an argument.

Wagg writes, “Politicians in Python are among the principal bearers of life’s absurdities and pomposities” (1992, p. 272). However, aside from mentions to Maudling and Thatcher, the seven episodes of Flying Circus that were analyzed in this study, mock bureaucracy. In explaining his decision dress as a carrot and stand up in front of an audience of Cambridge students without speaking, Chapman said, “That was my comment on the whole bloody business of people standing up and debating, trying to be clever, and eventually becoming politicians – [expletive] mess, they’re a load of bloody idiots, and none of them have any social conscience” (as cited in Wagg, 1992, p. 273). In summary, Flying Circus sketches question the validity of government institutions. As Palin wanders in and out of doors at the end of “The Money Programme” he finds himself up against a bureaucratic institution that insists Palin’s character is not entitled to the argument he wishes to have by creating new rules and realities.

Middle-class Professional Society

Satire in Flying Circus was not always turned outward. The members of Monty Python disliked groups and institutions that took themselves too seriously, and for that reason they did not want to take themselves too seriously either. The members of the comedy troupe did not graduate college and become the doctor, lawyer, or any other professional that their parents had wanted for them. This section examines social commentary of middle-class British society by identifying absurdity in order to satirize the middle class culture.
While Gilliam was raised in Minnesota and went to college in Los Angeles, the other members of Monty Python had similar British upbringings. While *Flying Circus* was able to eventually find an audience outside of the United Kingdom, initially the program was produced for a British audience. For that reason, the members of Monty Python were able to speak specifically to British conventions in order to satirize the lives that most middle-class Britons were leading at the time. In *Flying Circus*, sketches exist that comment specifically on issues that affect the average middle-class Britons that the members of Monty Python wanted to avoid becoming. In other words, some of the most constraining authority members were always not military officers or politicians, but the mundane occupations that their parents wanted the members of Monty Python to eventually become: the middle-class, unemotional, overly-conventional British public.

Britain’s social structure presents the middle-class as constrained and reserved in several aspects of their lives, including employment. The members of Monty Python felt that middle-class professionals have truly mundane jobs. For that reason, they were not eager to enter that middle-class professional existence, but they were very interested in making fun of those reserved professionals in the series. In *Flying Circus*, these conventional and boring professions are made more interesting by having unexpected occurrences take place. “The Naked Ant” abuses these social constraints. Seen working in an office, both John Cleese and Eric Idle are facing each other with a large window in the background. Visually, nothing is odd about the setting of the sketch. However, when a body falls past the window to the ground, the sketch becomes a confrontation between Idle and Cleese about who precisely has dropped past the window:

**First Man (Idle):** Two people have just fallen out of that window to their almost certain death.

**Second Man (Cleese):** Fine, fine. Fine.
First Man: Look! Two people (another falls) three people have just fallen past that window.

Second Man: Must be a board meeting.

First Man: Oh. Yeah. (Another falls past) Hey. That was Wilkins of finance.

Second Man: Oh, no, that was Robertson.

First Man: Wilkins.

Second Man: Robertson.

First Man: Wilkins.

Second Man: Robertson.

Another falls.

First Man: That was Wilkins.

Second Man: That was Wilkins. He was a good, er golfer, Wilkins.

First Man: Very good golfer. Very good golfer. It’ll be Parkinson next.

Second Man: Bet you it won’t.

The First Man’s concern for the fallen colleagues does not last long. In the same way, the Second Man’s apathy is also short-lived. Soon, both Idle and Cleese are involved in the fact that office workers are falling from a building. However, their involvement is based strictly on the fact that betting five dollars on who will fall next is a break from the mundane nature of their employment.

“Full Frontal Nudity” features a sketch about Hermits that violate society’s definition by interacting with one another. One brief moment of dialogue between Idle and Palin also illustrates a social critique of middle-class professional society:

First Hermit (Palin): Still there’s one thing about being a hermit, at least you meet people.

Second Hermit (Idle): Oh yes, I wouldn’t go back to public relations.

First Hermit: Of course.
In a broader examination of humor in this sketch, the dialogue functions as humor as incongruity because the *Flying Circus* definition of a “hermit” is not matched to social logic. Furthermore, the dialogue is also a critique of middle-class professionals. Idle’s character argues that as a middle-class professional he did not get to “meet people” and form relationships. The character prefers being a hermit – although not what society defines as a hermit necessarily – to being in a mundane, middle-class job.

The same episode places blame on mundane middle class jobs as the incident that fueled the “dangerous” behavior of the “Hell’s Grannies.” As a reporter, Idle says, “The whole problem of these senile delinquents lies in their complete rejection of the values of contemporary society. They’ve seen their children grow up and become accountants, stockbrokers, and even sociologists, and they begin to wonder if it is all really [worth it].” *Flying Circus* portrays the “Hell’s Grannies” as experiencing discontent. The grannies revolted against the constraints of middle-class society as a representation of the feelings Cleese, Chapman, Idle, Jones, Palin, and Gilliam.

In addition to criticizing the mundane professions of middle class Britons, *Flying Circus* criticized British charities. Founded in 1895 in order to “primarily conserve the countryside” (Clarke, 2004, p. 386), the National Trust was maintained by donations from the British middle-class who benefitted from domestic and international tourists alike that wanted to visit historic sites. The National Trust asked for donations via radio and television announcements. In “Archaeology Today,” Idle appears as a smartly dressed woman – a clichéd image for any organization making a plea for donations – who is set to make an appeal on behalf of the National Trust. However, the audience can never receive the message because the woman cannot remember a crucial component of her introduction:

**Woman:** Good evening. My name is Leapy Lee. No, sorry. That’s the name of me favorite singer. My name is Mrs. Fred Stolle. No, no, Mrs. Fred Stolle is the wife of me favorite tennis
player. My name is Bananas. No, no, that’s my favorite fruit. I’m Mrs. Nice-evening-out-at-the-pictures-then-perhaps-a-dance-at-the-club-and-back-to-his-place-for-a-quick-cup-of-coffee-and-a-bit-of – no! No, sorry that’s me favorite way of spending a night out. Perhaps I am Leapy Lee? Yes! I must be Leapy Lee! Hello fans! Leapy Lee here! (Sings) Little arrow that will… (The phone rings.) Hello? …Evidently I’m not Leapy Lee. I thought I probably wouldn’t be. Thank you, I’ll tell them. (Puts phone down)

Now that the phone has rung, the expectation is that the issue at hand has been cleared up. Therefore, the woman should now be prepared to make her appeal on behalf of the National Trust. What Idle does in this sketch is mock the type of people who perform these duties in British culture. The absurd notion of failing to remember one’s name is and still being selected as a spokesperson is a critique of such middle-class British institutions like the National Trust.

_Flying Circus_ used absurdity in order to mock and satirize British institutions. Because _Flying Circus_ satisfied the group’s “need to make fun of the left as well as the right” (Wagg, 1992, p. 274), the mockery was at times turned inwardly by causing middle class society to appear as ludicrous and absurd as authority figures and institutions. The next chapter will continue an analysis of these seven episodes by commenting on micro-elements and editing techniques used in the series as a function of absurdist humor to violate expectations.
Chapter Three: Micro-Analysis of Entire Episodes

Dead parrots and dirty Hungarian phrasebooks continue to be funny as the years go on. Smaller elements of a larger work – such as an episode – work together to establish *Flying Circus* a place in our collective memory. This chapter analyzes these smaller elements – links, individual sketches, editing, etc. – of seven episodes of *Flying Circus* in terms of a unique interpretation of humor as absurdity and the violation of expectations. Some of these micro-elements that will be examined in this chapter as they occur in each of the episodes are stream-of-conscious animations (done by Gilliam), interruption and/or abandonment of sketches, repetition, and altering of credits and the structure of an episode to violate audience expectations (see Table 3, p. 67).

The transitions from sketch-to-sketch and the lack of punch-lines make *Flying Circus* a memorable and important television program in genre studies. Neale and Krutnik identified that while in a typical variety show the links or transitions are separate from the sketch itself, in *Flying Circus* “elements of the linking segment and the sketch overlap with one another, eventually to generate what is in effect a hybrid mini-sketch” (1990, p. 197). As discussed in chapter one (p. 11), genres are dynamic and the creation of hybrids affect the program and the genre itself. Because of this blend of transitions into the sketches themselves, the analysis in this chapter will look at each episode as a whole in chronological order and argue that it is the smaller elements – as well as the episode as a whole – that violate generic expectations about television programs and conventions through absurdity.
Table 3: Key Strategies Used in Each Episode

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Full Frontal Nudity: “This is an ex parrot.”

Featuring what Douglas Adams – author of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* and friend of Graham Chapman, both before and after Chapman stopped drinking in the late 1970s – called “one of the most famous sketches [Monty Python] ever did” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 214), “Full Frontal Nudity” was first broadcast on BBC-1 on December 7, 1969. As with other *Flying Circus* episodes from the first season, “Full Frontal Nudity” both begins and ends with Michael Palin as “the It’s Man” – a character named after the one-word line that leads into opening credits for the show. The episode – the eighth of the series – combines stock film and animation with live-action performances by the member of Monty Python.
Several years after Chapman’s death, John Cleese – who wrote primarily with Chapman – recalled that Graham was “always good at playing the Colonel figure” (Graham Chapman’s Personal Best, 2005). Following the cartoon opening credits and brief man-in-the-street interview segments that Flying Circus often used as quick transitions, Chapman as the memorable Colonel made his first appearance:

**Watkins (Idle):** I’d like to leave the army please, sir.

**Colonel:** Good heavens man, why? [...] Watkins, why did you join the army?

**Watkins:** For the water-skiing and for the travel! Not for the killing, sir. I asked them to put it on my form, sir – no killing.

**Colonel:** Watkins are you a pacifist?

**Watkins:** No, sir. I’m not a pacifist, sir. I’m a coward.

**Colonel:** That’s a very silly line. Sit down.

The dialogue not only illustrates humor as incongruity – as defined in chapter one (pp. 5-6) as “recognition that something is inconsistent with the expected rational nature of the perceived environment” (Lynch, 2002, p. 428) – in terms of Idle’s character saying that he joined the army for the water-skiing, but also when Chapman broke away from the expected script at the end of the conversation to comment on the writing of the program, he violates expectations of a sketch. The generic sketch form does not include characters breaking away from the internal dialogue to abruptly end the conversation (Neale, 2001c; Wilmut, 1980). Spike Milligan – of The Goon Show – had also abandoned sketches in his television program *Q5*. As Roger Wilmut pointed out, Milligan’s style was different than Monty Python’s because Milligan often would end sketch by muttering “Did I write this?” and walking away from the camera giving the program “an improvised feel” (Wilmut, 1980, p. 197). When Flying Circus featured the Colonel in the abandonment of sketches, the sketches did not
end simply because characters muttered and walked away. Instead, Chapman often appeared very serious and would speak directly to the camera, demonstrating authority.

Even though Eric Idle’s character was dismissed, the episode of *Flying Circus* does not immediately move on. With Idle still visible sitting by the door – his punishment for being too silly – Michael Palin and Terry Jones enter, representing several mafia stereotypes, including expensive-looking pinstripe suits and offering the Colonel protection for a price because “you wouldn’t want something to happen to one of your tanks.” Like he did with Idle’s character, Chapman’s Colonel gets fed up and demands that the sketch stop. This time, Chapman also provides a transition within his authoritative ranting:

**Colonel:** No, the whole premise is silly and it’s very badly written, I’m the senior officer here and I haven’t had a funny line yet. So I’m stopping it.

**Dino (Jones):** You can’t do that!

**Colonel:** I’ve done it. The sketch is over.

**Watkins:** I want to leave the army please sir, it’s dangerous.

**Colonel:** Look, I stopped your sketch five minutes ago. So get out of shot. Right director!

Close up. Zoom in on me. *(Camera zooms in.)* That’s better.

**Dino (off screen):** It’s only ‘cos you couldn’t think of a punch line.

**Colonel:** Not true, not true. It’s time for the cartoon. Cue telecine, ten, night, eight—

(*Cut to telecine countdown.*)

**Dino (off screen):** The general public’s not going to understand this, are they?

**Colonel (off screen):** Shut up you eyeties [a British derogatory slang term for Italians]!

Although the transition to one of Gilliam’s cartoons entitled “Full Frontal Nudity” moves quickly in the pace of the show, there are multiple elements that can be examined. Like other *Flying Circus*
sketches, with subsequent viewing, a greater number of microelements all contribute to the overall sketch are noted.

One of the reasons that the Colonel has had enough of the sketch is because as the senior officer, he has not yet had a funny line. As a result, the Colonel decides the sketch must stop and move along to the cartoon. It is an abrupt transition for those that expect a sketch to end with a joke and fade to a black-out. Jones’ character explicitly mentions the abruptness when he argues, “It’s only ‘cos you couldn’t think of a punch line.” A typical sketch has a beginning, middle, and end. Without a punch line, a sketch cannot have an “easy” end.

For John Cleese, who wrote the sketch with an unusual writing partner, Palin, Dino’s parting line about the general public not being capable of understanding why the Colonel had declared such an abrupt end to the scene has a contextual meaning. Along with Chapman, who was Cleese’s usual writing partner, Cleese was a writer/performer on The Frost Report (1966-1967). During that time, the writers were unable to include more absurd and surreal humor in the script. Wilmot wrote, “Where [Monty Python] did hope to improve on The Frost Report was in the inclusion of rather more bizarre humour. Attempts to get this sort of material into The Frost Report tended to lead to the official reaction, ‘They wouldn’t understand that in Bradford’ (although what was so backward about Bradford was never explained)” (1980, p. 196). Flying Circus aimed to violate conventional expectations about the general public. Cleese and the others previously had to curtail their writing and their performances to the conventions of the television medium. Dino’s line accuses the Colonel of confusing the public who are familiar with these conventions. Although this de-familiarization – or forcing the audience to view common elements in an unfamiliar of strange way – became a significant Python trait (Landy, 2005; Neale, 2001b; Neale & Krutnik, 1990), for other television programs, sticking to conventions is a way to become successful. The Colonel’s final command can be viewed as
an expression – albeit an abrupt one – of the freedom *Flying Circus* experienced in its first season while audiences and the BBC were each trying to figure out exactly what to make of the program.

The return of Idle’s character of the scared soldier illustrates *Flying Circus*’ use of repetition. Along with de-familiarization, Neale and Krutnik (1990) classified repetition as a defining element of *Flying Circus*. Although Idle was never out of shot as Chapman interacted with Jones and Palin, the character – Private Watkins – tries once more to be involved in the script by delivering his line about wanting to leave the army when he sees that the Colonel has had enough of listening to brothers, Luigi and Dino. The repetition Idle provides is met by agitation from the Colonel, who once again uses his own authority to order Watkins out of the frame.

Repetition as a rhetorical device in *Flying Circus* is used not only in returning to earlier dialogue in the same scene, but often – as in the case of “Full Frontal Nudity” – lines from earlier in the episode will be repeated in different sketches. This repetition serves to connect the episode. Often times, the line is not particularly humorous by itself, but seen in the context of the entire episode, it is funny. The example of this repetition in “Full Frontal Nudity” first occurs in the art critic sketch.

The art critic sketch is a short sketch. It follows Gilliam’s animation that the scared soldier sketch led into and a short man-in-the-street interview segment featuring first Jones and Chapman as two seemingly naked – the shot is a medium close-up – men proclaiming they would never do full frontal nudity and followed by Palin dressed as stockbroker saying he would perform a part that called for full frontal nudity if the pay was good. The next cut shows Michael Palin leering at a painting of a nude woman. Palin is an art critic, as superimposed captions say. Palin’s character seems to be a bit guilty to be caught staring so intently at the nude woman by the camera that he flubs his line repeatedly. Katya Wyeth – an actress who appeared briefly in only two episodes of *Flying Circus* – enters and delivers a line that is meant to be a double entendre:

**Art Critic:** Oh hello there father, er confessor, professor, your honour, your grace…”
Girl (cutely): I’m not your Grace, I’m your Elsie.

Art Critic: What a terrible joke!

Girl (crying): But it’s my only line!

This sketch is the first time – but not the final time – the line, “But it’s my only line!” appears in the episode. In the next sketch – referred to as “a honeymoon couple buy a bed” on the DVD – the line is delivered again.

The transition to the art critic sketch to the honeymoon couple buying a bed sketch began with a long pan across the countryside, something Eric Idle said was very typical of Jones’ and Palin’s writing (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 99). The idyllic countryside is interrupted by the suggestion of violence:

Voice Over (Palin): But there let us leave the art critic to strangle his wife and move on to pastures new.

After a few seconds of mood setting the camera suddenly comes across the art critic strangling his wife in the middle foreground. As the camera passes him he hums nervously and tries to look as though he isn’t strangling anybody. The camera doesn’t stop panning, and just as it goes off him we see him start strangling again.

Without being too gruesome, the transition violates expectations. In other words, for the audience, the context does not match the location. The laughter from the studio audience represents humor as incongruity. For this particular situation, the logic does not match up as the audience would expect it to.

The transition in this case relies purely on visual effect. Although the voice over suggests “[moving] on to pastures new,” it is while the camera is panning that the honeymoon couple – portrayed by Terry Jones and Carol Cleveland – who many (Landy, 2005; Wilmot, 1980) have argued is the “seventh Python” – are visible for the first time as the camera continues to pan clockwise. Jones,
with Cleveland in his arms, begins running across the country landscape. Next, the two are on an urban sidewalk. As Wilmut (1980) pointed out, *Flying Circus* was often filmed in populated areas, which was unusual at the time. Upon entering a department store, the sketch begins upon Jones – while panting – lowers Carol Cleveland to the ground:

**Groom:** We want to buy a bed, please.

**Lambert (Chapman):** Oh, certainly. I’ll get someone to attend to you. (*Calling off*) Mr. Verity!

**Verity (Idle):** Can I help you sir?

**Groom:** Er yes. We’d like to buy a bed…a double bed…about fifty pounds?

**Verity:** Oh no, I am afraid not sir. Our cheapest bed is eight hundred pounds, sir.

**Groom:** Eight hundred pounds!

**Lambert:** Oh, er, perhaps I should have explained. Mr. Verity does tend to exaggerate, so every figure he gives you will be ten times too high. Otherwise he’s perfectly all right.

Whether using numbers – as is the case here – or volume and pitch of a person’s voice, the theme of altering communication to at times very absurd standards was used often on *Flying Circus*. As the sketch continues, the alterations of language grow increasingly bizarre:

**Groom:** So your cheapest bed is eighty pounds?

**Verity:** Eight hundred pounds, yes sir.

**Groom:** And how wide is it?

**Verity:** Er, the width is, er, sixty feet wide.

**Groom:** Oh…six foot wide, eh. And the length?

**Verity:** The length is…er… (*Calls off*) Lambert! What is the length of the Comfydown Majorette?

**Lambert:** Er, two foot long.
**Groom:** Two foot long?

**Verity:** Ah yes, you have to, ah, remember of course to multiply everything Mr. Lambert says by three. Er, it’s nothing he can help, you understand. Apart from that he’s perfectly all right. [...] But it does mean that when he says a bed is two foot wide it is, in fact, sixty feet wide.

Often in the series, Terry Jones – when not in drag – would portray an “ordinary man caught in a lunatic situation” (Wilmut, 1980, p.220). His character is confused by the adjustments being made to language; however, the Groom accepts each of these characteristics without much alarm. When Verity tells the Bride and the Groom that Lambert will assist them in the purchase of a mattress, the sketch escalates. Still, Jones’ character continues to communicate with a group of men who behave more strangely with each passing moment:

**Verity:** Lambert! Will you show these twenty good people the, er, dog kennel please? [...] You have to say dog kennel to Mr. Lambert because if you say mattress he puts a bag over his head. I should have explained. Apart from that he’s really all right.

*They go to Lambert.*

**Groom:** Ah, hum, we’d like to see the dog kennels please.

**Lambert:** Dog kennels?

**Groom:** Yes, we want to see the dog kennels.

**Lambert:** Ah yes, well that’s the pets department. Second floor.

**Groom:** Oh, no, no, we want to see the dog kennels.

**Lambert:** Yes, pets department second floor.

**Groom:** No, no, no, we don’t really want to see dog kennels only your colleague said we ought to—

**Lambert:** Oh dear, what’s he been telling you now?
**Groom:** Well he said we should say dog kennels to you, instead of mattress.

*Lambert puts bag over head.*

**Groom:** Oh dear, hello?

**Verity:** Did you say mattress? [...] I did ask you not to say mattress didn’t I. Now I’ve got to stand in the tea chest. (*He gets in the chest and sings.* ‘And did those feet in ancient times, walk upon England’s mountains green…’

**Manager (Cleese):** Did somebody say mattress to Mr. Lambert!

Once both Cleese’s and Idle’s characters have stood inside the chest and sang, Chapman’s character removes the bag from over the top of his head.

As common with *Flying Circus* sketches, absurdity continues to build on top of more absurdity. In other words, the Pythons “take an idea and then allow it to get wildly out of hand” (Wilmut, 1980, p. 198). This escalation into insanity occurs in the sketch when once again Jones’ character says mattress to Mr. Lambert:

**Groom:** Well, I mean you put a bag over your head last time I said mattress.

*Bag goes on. Groom looks around guiltily. Verity walks in. Verity heaves a sigh, jumps in box. Manager comes in and joins him; they sing ‘And did those feet…’ Another assistant comes in.*

**Assistant (Palin):** Did somebody say mattress to Mr. Lambert?

**Verity:** Twice.

**Assistant:** Hey, everybody, somebody said mattress to Mr. Lambert! Twice!

*Assistant, Groom, and Bride join in the therapy.*

**Verity:** It’s not working. We need more.

*Cut to crowd in St. Peter’s Square singing ‘Jerusalem.’*

*Cut to department store. Lambert takes the bag off his head and looks at Groom and Bride.*
Lambert: Now, er, can I help you?

Bride (Cleveland): We want a mattress.

*Lambert immediately puts bag back on his head.*

All: Oh. What did you say that for?

Bride (*weeping*): Well, it’s my only line.

*They all begin hopping. Bride howls.*

What began as a sketch about mathematical exaggerations escalated to musical performances and lastly, hopping around a department store without ever addressing why they had begun to hop. Although the concept of a woman crying, “It’s my only line” is a repeat from earlier in the episode, by the time the department store sketch cuts to another man-in-the-street interview with more thoughts on full frontal nudity, if the audience wishes to maintain generic expectations in the viewing of a television program, they are not able to; the reason for the hopping is never explained.

Following a brief clip of John as a chartered accountant saying, “I would only perform a scene in which there was total frontal nudity,” *Flying Circus*’ Colonel makes his second appearance in the episode. Once again, the Colonel uses his authority to provide a link that would keep the program moving. He does so in a monologue that at the same time, denounces the members of Monty Python for being too silly (see chapter two, p. 53) before announcing a transition by saying, “Now, let’s have a good, clean, healthy outdoor sketch. Get some air into your lungs. Ten, nine, eight, and all that.” In the series, the recurring Colonel became a visual punch line to those familiar with the program because every so often he would walk on and interrupt sketches, belittling the characters present for getting too surreal. As the Colonel, Chapman fulfilled the role of taking generic expectations to the extreme. If a sketch got too absurd he would walk on and order the sketch to stop. However, by interrupting sketches the Colonel himself violates a convention of television sketch comedy because he does not allow many sketches to reach a conclusion.
Following the Colonel’s orders, the camera cuts to Eric Idle sitting on a hillside in dirty clothes. The Colonel approves of this image and off-screen says, “Ah yes, that’s better. Now let’s hope this doesn’t get silly.” To begin the sketch, Michael Palin – also in clothes covered in dust – approaches and sits beside Idle.

**First Hermit (Palin):** Hello, are you a hermit by any chance?

**Second Hermit (Idle):** Yes, I certainly am.

The sketch does not involve a lot of action. Visually, the sketch is merely Idle and Palin sitting beside one another talking while the occasional additional hermit – played by (in order) Chapman, Cleese, and Jones – wander by offering salutations to Eric Idle. However, the dialogue of the sketch uses humor to violate expectations.

Educated individuals are familiar with what society defines as a “hermit.” By creating comedy through showing hermits who not only interact with one another, but in the case of Mr. Robinson – who as Idle’s character describes is “the hermit who lodges with Mr. Seagrave” – also live together, the sketch violates our expectations. Palin and Idle each interact with one another recounting their daily activities until:

**Colonel (coming on):** Right, you two hermits, stop that sketch. I think it’s silly.

**Second Hermit:** What?

**Colonel:** It’s silly.

**Second Hermit:** What do you mean, you can’t stop it – it’s on film.

**Colonel:** That doesn’t make any difference to the viewer at home, does it? Come on, get out.

Once again, fed up with the portrayal of fictional hermits, who did not behave as hermits should, the Colonel interrupts the sketch and ushers all of the characters out of the scene. The Colonel ushers everyone associated with the setting – other hermits, television cameramen, actors in robes giving
interviews – out of shot. This action transitions into one of Gilliam’s animations that show a giant broom sweeping people right off the side of a cliff.

Gilliam’s animations “feed on implicit savagery of some sketches and give the show a violent aspect not normally found in television comedy” (Wilmut, 1980, p. 204). This animation links the Hermit sketch to the famous Parrot sketch. Once the giant broom sweeps people off the cliff, those people fall into a cartoon pasta maker. Next, a cartoon hand cranks the pasta maker. Without the hint of any blood or severed body parts, the people turn into what is assumed to be pasta. However, the next frame shows that it is hair, not pasta. Flying Circus’ college-educated audience is able to recognize the hair as Botticelli’s painting, The Birth of Venus.

In order to show off his talent of using magazine and catalogue cut-outs for his cartoons in the program, the image of Venus begins to dance by swinging her leg in a complete circle. The animation has gone from the violence associated with a group of people being stuffed inside a pasta maker to a more fantastic, dream-like vision that uses music and animation. In several instances Gilliam has commented on how he felt that he was “the most free” (Life of Python, 1999; Monty Python Live in Aspen, 1998) in terms of writing because he did not have to present any of his animations to the rest of the group; he never needed the approval of the other five because it was near impossible to explain his animations to the others. His animations were often used as links. When the shell in which Venus stands on topples over and falls into the water, the transition to the Parrot sketch – a sketch that begins with a live-action shell sinking into a fish tank – is done smoothly.

Described by Cleese – who wrote the sketch with Chapman – as sketch meant to portray “the impossibility of getting service” (as cited in Wilmut, 1980, p. 204), the Parrot sketch would go on to be one of the most remembered Python sketches, and its first appearance was in “Full Frontal Nudity.” Palin reported in 1999 that he loved being in the Parrot sketch because in performing the sketch for the first time, he had the ability to flesh out the character. Palin described his character in the sketch as
being a good representation of Python material. He said, “The characters John and Graham have written, like in the ‘Parrot’ sketch, is just a man giving lots of excuses, and somebody who knows what he wants and not being able to get it. That’s a [kind of Python] humor: you set something up and then some tiny little occurrence or event destroys it completely because that’s the way human beings are” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 116). Like in the Hermit sketch, the action in the sketch is limited to a small scale.

While some of the humor in the sketch is visual, the sketch reflects Chapman’s and Cleese’s sketches as having a focus on confrontation and words. The confrontation between Palin’s and Cleese’s begins at the beginning with Palin’s evasiveness. Cleese enters as Mr. Praline and says, “I wish to register a complaint,” a very stiff-upper-lip British form of complaining without sounding classless and overly emotional. In live performances that Monty Python has done in several countries – not just in Britain – Cleese’ opening line, would be met with so much applause that at times Palin (2006) commented in his diary that either he or John would be close to laughing and during the delay. The studio audience, however, did not realize that they were watching television history in the same way that the members of Monty Python could not have possibly known in 1969 that they were making history. The sketch continues:

**Praline:** Hello, miss?

**Shopkeeper (Palin):** What do you mean, miss?

**Praline:** Oh, I’m sorry, I have a cold. I wish to make a complaint.

**Shopkeeper:** Sorry we’re closing for lunch.

**Praline:** Never mind that my lad, I wish to complain about this parrot what I purchased not half an hour ago from this very boutique.

**Shopkeeper:** Oh yes, the Norwegian Blue. What’s wrong with it?

**Praline:** I’ll tell you what’s wrong with it. It’s dead, that’s what’s wrong with it.
Shopkeeper: No, no it’s resting, look!

Praline: Look my lad, I know a dead parrot when I see one and I’m looking at one right now.

Shopkeeper: No, no sir, it’s not dead. It’s resting.

Praline: Resting?

Shopkeeper: Yeah, remarkable bird the Norwegian Blue, beautiful plumage, innit?

Praline: The plumage don’t enter into it – it’s stone dead.

Shopkeeper: No, no – it’s just resting.

At this point in the sketch, escalates further into absurdity because of a humorous disconnect between what is occurring and what generic conventions suggest should occur:

Praline: All right then, if it’s resting I’ll wake it up. (Shouts into cage) Hello Polly! I’ve got a nice cuttlefish for you when you wake up, Polly Parrot!

Shopkeeper: (Jogging cage) There. It moved.

Praline: No he didn’t. That was you pushing the cage.

Shopkeeper: I did not.

Praline: Yes, you did. (Takes parrot out of cage, shouts) Hello Polly, Polly (bangs parrot against counter) Polly Parrot, wake up. Polly. (Throes it in the air and lets it fall to the floor)

Now that’s what I call a dead parrot.

A more conventional and generic sketch would expect to end after Cleese says, “Now that’s what I call a dead parrot.” The line is delivered with a sense of conclusion. However, *Flying Circus* was not only known for ending sketches abruptly, but also for carrying on beyond where an audience expects a sketch to end.

Throughout the sketch, Palin’s character evades Cleese’s accusations that he sold him a dead parrot. As Palin continues to make excuses – the parrot is “stunned,” and the parrot is “pining for the fiords” – Cleese grows more agitated:
**Praline:** Pining for the fiords? What kind of talk is that? Look, why did it fall flat on its back the moment I got it home?

**Shopkeeper:** The Norwegian Blue prefers kipping on its back. Beautiful bird, lovely plumage.

**Praline:** Look, I took the liberty of examining that parrot, and I discovered that the only reason it had been sitting on its perch in the first place was that it had been nailed there.

In reality, this statement would have the shopkeeper trapped. Logically, the shopkeeper would need to admit his guilt because Mr. Praline had examined the bird and found it was nailed to its perch. However, in the surreal – or disorientating and fantastic – world of *Flying Circus* the shopkeeper even had what he thought was a valid excuse for why the bird was nailed to its perch:

**Shopkeeper:** Well of course it was nailed there. Otherwise it would muscle up to those bars and voom.

**Praline:** Look matey (*picks up parrot*) this parrot wouldn’t voom it I put four thousand volts through it. It’s bleeding demised.

**Shopkeeper:** It’s not, it’s pining.

**Praline:** It’s not pining, it’s passed on. This parrot is no more. It has ceased to be. It’s expired and gone to meet its maker. This is a late parrot. It’s a stiff. Bereft of life, it rests in peace. If you hadn’t nailed it to the perch, it would be pushing up the daisies. It’s rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible. This is an ex-parrot.

Cleese’s monologue is typical of Chapman and Cleese’s style of “thesaurus sketches” (Wilmut, 1980, p. 211). Cleese’s character has found different ways to say “dead.” While the shopkeeper does now give in to Cleese’s argument that the bird is dead, Palin does not become any less evasive:

**Shopkeeper:** Well, I’d better replace it then.
**Praline (to camera):** If you want to get anything done in this country you’ve got to complain till you’re blue in the mouth.

Once again, Mr. Praline delivers a line that a conventional sketch would end on. However, as writers Chapman and Cleese found humor in the unexpected the sketch does not end on the note of social satire, as the audience would expect it to if they were familiar with sketch comedy generic conventions.

There are expectations we have when we walk into a pet store. For one, a pet store includes animals. In the “Parrot Sketch,” the shopkeeper is unable to replace the parrot because he has run out – a joke that was also used in the “Cheese Shop” during the third season. Not to seem unhelpful, the shopkeeper offers a solution that suggests humor as incongruity:

**Shopkeeper:** Sorry guy, we’re right out of parrots.

**Praline:** I see. I see. I get the picture.

**Shopkeeper:** I’ve got a slug.

**Praline:** Does it talk?

**Shopkeeper:** Not really, no.

**Praline:** Well, it’s scarcely a replacement, then, is it?

**Shopkeeper:** Listen, I’ll tell you what, (*handing over a card*) if you go to my brother’s pet shop in Bolton, he’ll replace your parrot for you.

**Praline:** Bolton eh?

**Shopkeeper:** Yeah.

**Praline:** All right. (*He leaves, holding the parrot.*)

Close-up of sign on door reading: ‘Similar Pet Shops Ltd.’ Pull back from sign to see same pet shop. Shopkeeper now has moustache. Praline walks into shop. He looks around with interest, noticing the empty parrot cage still on the floor.

**Praline:** Er, excuse me. This is Bolton, is it?

**Shopkeeper:** No, no it’s, er, Ipswich.

**Praline (to camera):** That’s Inter-City rail for you. (*Leaves*)

Ipswich is near London in the South of England. As explained in chapter two (p. 60), the British audience would understand the dig at Inter-city rail because they would be familiar with the location of these British cities. For an audience who is not familiar with the geography of Britain, they would not know the distance between Bolton and Ipswich—approximately 250 miles—however they would be able to deduce that Ipswich is nowhere near where Praline wants to be.

Praline goes to the Inter-City rail’s complaint department. Once again, he enters on the same opening line saying, “I wish to make a complaint.” Two details in this short interchange should be mentioned in this analysis. The first is a comment on television as a medium. Following Praline’s opening comment the sketch continues:

**Porter (Jones):** I don’t have to do this, you know. […] I’m a qualified brain surgeon. I only do this because I like being my own boss.

**Praline:** Er, excuse me; this is irrelevant, isn’t it?

**Porter:** Oh yeah, it’s not easy to pad these out to thirty minutes.

The “these” Jones’ character was referring to is television episodes. The one convention *Flying Circus* was not allowed to break was the time length of an episode. The six members of Monty Python had to reach thirty minutes, and since television was run by the government, there were no commercial breaks between sketches. In this way, British sketch comedy was different than American sketch comedy programs, such as *Saturday Night Live*. The members of Monty Python padded the sketch
with “irrelevant” information because they viewed television programs at the time as being guilty of such “padding.”

The second important element to take away from the interaction between Praline and the Porter is that Jones’ character reveals to Praline that he is in Bolton. For Mr. Praline to realize that he is in Bolton, it means that he can return to the pet shop in order to conclude “The Parrot Sketch” with Michael Palin:

**Praline:** I understand this is Bolton.

**Shopkeeper:** Yes.

**Praline:** Well, you told me it was Ipswich.

**Shopkeeper:** It was a pun.

**Praline:** A pun?

**Shopkeeper:** No, no, not a pun, no. What’s the other thing, which reads the same backwards as forwards?

**Praline:** A palindrome?

**Shopkeeper:** Yes, yes.

**Praline:** It’s not a palindrome. The palindrome of Bolton would be Notlob. It don’t work.

**Shopkeeper:** Look, what do you want?

**Praline:** No, I’m sorry; I’m not prepared to pursue my line of enquiry any further as I think this is getting too silly.


Once again the Colonel has made an appearance not only to bring a sketch to an end in a manner that he has done previously in “Full Frontal Nudity,” but he also once again fulfills the role of a transition.

The next image is of Eric Idle as a television news anchor. The setting is familiar to any member of the audience who has ever seen a news program: Idle is in a nice suit and sitting behind a
large desk. While several visual elements are generic and familiar, as done with Jones’ line from earlier regarding the “padding” of a program to meet time requirements, the news program is one genre *Flying Circus* particularly enjoyed mocking. This case is no different. Although the nice suit and wide desk fit the generic expectations of the news program genre, Idle is preoccupied with eating a yogurt – something perceived as very unprofessional – and does not see the camera at first.

When Idle does see the camera, he stumbles. It takes multiple false starts and stammers before Idle introduces a video – one that is quite similar to any other news segment, including the fact that it was filmed with a handheld camera – that is titled, “Frontal Nudity.” The content of the short video violates audience expectations. The context of a shabby-looking man in a long trench coat that he opens wide to the horrified faces of three pedestrians encourages the audience to deduce that the man is flashing innocent people on the street. In addition, because Idle – as a news anchor – called the segment “Frontal Nudity,” it is easy to accept this conclusion. However, when the shabby character in the large coat turns to face the camera and pulls his coat open to reveal what image had encouraged shocked horror in the other three pedestrians, the audience sees that the man is fully clothed and instead has a large sign around his neck that reads, “BOO.”

The final sketch of the episode – “Hell’s Grannies” – was filmed on the populated city streets. While portions of *Flying Circus* episodes were filmed in a studio in front of an audience, other segments were film and compiled earlier and then shown to an audience as film footage. This technique is common among sketch comedy programs; even “live” shows use pre-recorded footage (Neale, 2001c). The “Hell’s Grannies” sketch uses brick walls, grass, trees, store-fronts, and other landmarks of city-life. As it transitioned from the news anchor segment – the anchor had returned to his yogurt before receiving a quick nudge from the Colonel to then say “And now, Notlob, er, Bolton” – the sketch is presented as a longer news story, complete with generic conventions like voice-overs, on-screen reporters, and interviews with members of the community who are affected by the story.
While many of the conventions of television news feature piece are present, because this is a *Flying Circus* sketch, the content is absurd. Like other sketches in “Full Frontal Nudity,” the absurdity and surreal nature of the content of this fictitious news story – which starts off rather high – escalates. To begin, Idle, as the reporter narrates via voice over. He says, “This is a frightened city. Over these houses, over these streets hangs a pall of fear. Fear of a new kind of violence which is terrorizing the city. Yes, gangs of old ladies are attacked defenseless fit young men.” Not only does the opening of Idle’s voice-over sound similar to the doomsday tone common with longer news features of violence on city streets, but as Idle recites his line, the visual presented is of two young men in leather jackets appearing tough and possibly mean. When the Hell’s Grannies – portrayed by the Pythons in drag and wigs – pop out from behind two trees and knock the men in leather jackets to the ground, the sketch moves towards the burlesque – the imitation of a serious matter, made amusing by the exaggerated disconnect between style and subject (Jump, 1972) – with the use of surprise humor:

**First Young Man (Palin):** Well they come up to you, like, and push you – shove you off the pavement, like. There’s usually four or five of them.

**Second Young Man (Jones):** Yeah, this used to be a nice neighborhood before the old ladies started moving in. Nowadays some of us daren’t even go down to the shops.

**Third Young Man (Cleese):** Well Mr. Johnson’s son Kevin, he don’t go out any more. He comes back from wrestling and locks himself in his room.

*Film of grannies harassing an attractive girl.*

**Voice Over:** What are they in it for, these old hoodlums, these layabouts in lace?

**First Granny (voice over):** Well, it’s something to do isn’t it?

**Second Granny (voice over):** It’s good fun.

**Third Granny (voice over):** It’s like you know, well, innit, eh?
By sharing this fact, the *Flying Circus* audience is seeing just how absurd this “vicious gang of old ladies” truly is. By running off with telephone booths and spray-painting “Make Tea, Not Love” on a wall, Hell’s Grannies are growing less frightening and more bizarre.

Dressed as a policeman – another common character for Chapman, who as the second tallest member of the group at 6’3 often portrayed authority figures – Graham Chapman provides a formal analysis of the activities of the Hell’s Grannies. He says, “We have a lot of trouble with these oldies. Pension day’s the worst – they go mad. As soon as they get their hands on their money they blow it on milk, bread, tea, tin of meat for the cat.” Having deduced bread and milk as a source of ammunition for the Hell’s Grannies, the sketch continues with further claims – all of which can be perceived as stereotyping the elderly – being made about the behavior of the gangs of old ladies:

**Cinema Manager (Jones):** Yes, well of course they come here for the two o’clock matinee, all the old bags out in there, especially if it’s something like *The Sound of Music*. We get seats ripped up, hearing aids broken, all that sort of thing.

*A policeman hustles two grannies out of the cinema. [...] Cut to young couple.*

**Young Man (Chapman):** Oh well we sometimes feel we’re to blame in some way for what our Gran’s become. I mean she used to be happy here until she, she started on the crochet. [...] Now she can’t do without it. Twenty balls of wool a day, sometimes. If she can’t get the wool she gets violent. What can we do about it?

*Film of grannies on motorbikes roaring down streets and through a shop. One has ‘Hell’s Grannies’ on her jacket.*

As the grannies ride off, Idle’s voice over suggests that the Hell’s Grannies are not the only trouble the city sees.

As mentioned previously, *Flying Circus* included sketches that would grow more and more absurd. Known as the baby snatchers, five grown men in diapers and bonnets run up to a husband
standing beside a baby carriage and run off with the husband. While social rules say there is nothing funny about kidnapping children, having the term “baby snatchers” imply that the men who are doing the abducting are dressed as babies who then steal fathers, the situation is humorous. As television is a visual medium, the humorous response increases when the audience actually sees the baby snatchers.

Trying to outdo the humorous baby snatchers in terms of absurdity is difficult, but Monty Python finds a way:

**Voice Over:** And on the road too, vicious gangs of keep-left signs.

*Film: two keep-left signs attack a vicar (portrayed by Idle).*

**Colonel:** *(Comes up and stops them)* Right, right, stop it. This film’s got silly. Started off with a nice little idea about grannies attacking young men, but now it’s got silly. This man’s hair is too long for a vicar too. These signs are pretty badly made. Right, now for a complete change of mood.

Before the Colonel interrupted the sketch, the vicious gang had become inanimate objects. The Colonel has clearly had enough. Not only did he find the sketch silly, but he does not approve of casting Idle as a vicar because his hair was too long.

As this episode is from the first season of *Flying Circus*, the episode begins and ends with Palin’s It’s-Man. For those in the audience who watched the entire episode, they will remember that at the very beginning of the show, a woman in a bikini handed a bomb to the It’s-Man. With superimposed credits rolling, the It’s-Man realizes that he has a bomb. He runs off in a zigzag still holding the bomb. As the credits to the show end, the bomb explodes.

*The Naked Ant:* “And Oliver has run himself over, what a great twit!”

Broadcast for the first time on January 4, 1970, “The Naked Ant” is the twelfth episode of *Flying Circus*. Where “Full Frontal Nudity” featured sketches that had little action and were mostly forms of verbal humor (e.g., “Hermit”), in “The Naked Ant,” visual elements play a much larger role.
In fact, one sketch – “Upper Class Twit of the Year” – is comprised entirely of visual humor: the only spoken element is a voice-over done by John Cleese. In “The Naked Ant,” *Flying Circus* continued to use man-in-the-street interviews and Gilliam’s animations to transition from sketch-to-sketch.

Following an appearance of Michael Palin as the It’s-Man doing a marvelous impression of a pinball as he bounces off of three trees in an open field and the opening credits, an animation done by Gilliam that has “ruined Sousa’s march ‘The Liberty Bell’ for ever for experienced Python fans who can never hear it without expecting a large barefoot to come crashing down on them in bar thirty-two” (Wilmut, 1980, p. 204), the episode begins with burlesque humor that takes the everyday and throws in absurdity. As a signal man in “a signal box somewhere near Hove,” as the caption reads, Terry Jones is attacked by a bear that he wrestles for 3.48 seconds. *Flying Circus* uses captions that read, “But in an office off the Goswell Road” to transition to the next sketch. The two sketches are unrelated apart from that they both project unexpected happenings during completely mundane jobs.

As described in chapter two (pp. 62-63), the sketch where Cleese and Idle excitedly encourage fellow office workers to jump out of a high window, is representative of *Flying Circus* altering the conventional constraints of day-to-day life in order to produce humor. Eventually in the sketch, the promise of excitement entices the two office workers. Soon, both Idle and Cleese are involved in the fact that office workers are falling from a building. However, their involvement is based strictly on the fact that betting five dollars on who will fall next is a break from the mundane nature of their employment:

**First Man (Idle):** How much do you bet it won’t? Fiver?

**Second Man (Cleese):** All right.

**First Man:** Done.

**Second Man:** You’re on.

**First Man:** Fine. (*The two men shake and look at the window.*) Come on Parky.
**Second Man:** Don’t do it Parky.

**First Man:** Come on Parky. Jump Parky. Jump.

**Second Man:** Come on now. Be sensible Parky.

In *Flying Circus*, sketches would at times be interrupted and then resume. At times this interruption would – through film editing – cut in an entirely different character in a different setting to say one or two words. However, the more common example – and what is used in this sketch – is to share a fictional letter, addressed to producers at the BBC.

These letters are often written in disapproval about a sketch or a character. Often contradictory, the complaint about the content of a sketch as follows:

**Voice Over (Chapman):** Dear Sir, I am writing to complain about the sketch about people falling out of a high building. I have worked all my life in such and building and have never once—

*Cut to film of man falling out of window.*

A letter such as this are not only a comment on the absurdity of citizens who sit around watching television only so that they can complain about the things they have seen, but these letters also break sketches without abandoning them. Several times in an episode such as “The Naked Ant” the camera will cut to such a letter – sometimes handwritten, sometimes typed – and afterwards return to the sketch as though the camera had never left:

**First Man:** Parkinson!

**Second Man:** Johnson!

The members of Monty Python were playing with the form of a sketch comedy program by repositioning the narrative structure. In other words, characters or settings would be returned to in an episode.
As with other *Flying Circus* animations, the animation that follows the men falling from a building was not only a link and a transition to other sketches in the episode, but the animations would be largely inspired by the sketch itself. Gilliam would not present his ideas to the others at the same time the live-action sketches would be presented. Because Gilliam would know what material would be in the episode before he made his animations, the animations would often be related. For this scenario, Gilliam’s animation built on the concept of people falling. The animation shows people falling against a white backdrop. However, as with the animation in “Full Frontal Nudity” with the pasta machine, things are not as they seem. In the first animation of “The Naked Ant,” a pair of hands appears to turn the backdrop sideways: people are now “falling” across the screen rather than just downward. Now, the people are not only falling in one direction, and as the camera zooms out on the animation the audience can see why: the people are bouncing off the stomach of a larger image of a woman that takes up about one-fifth of the screen.

Gilliam once said, “You can do things to animated people that you can’t do to real ones” (*Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut*, 2009). Therefore in the animation when the lady removes her own head to catch one of the smaller people falling across the screen, the action personifies the freedom Gilliam felt as the show’s animator. Gilliam was able to violate the boundaries of the real. Globes were allowed to crush naked women because he was dealing with a two-dimensional realm. Such an image is what transitions from the cartoon to the following sketch, called “Spectrum.”

“Spectrum” parodies generic elements of television urgent news shows, even right down to the type of music often played at the beginning of such a segment. The pundits are all intense. However, what is being shown in this sketch is that these presenters are all fast-talkers who are not actually saying anything:

**Presenter (Palin):** Good evening. Tonight ‘Spectrum’ looks at one of the major problems in the world today – that old vexed question of what is going on. Is there still time to confront it,
let alone solve it, or is it too late? What are the figures, what are the facts, what do people mean when they talk about things? Alexander Hardacre of the Economic Affairs Bureau.

_Cut to equally intense pundit in front of a graph with three different colored columns with percentages at the top. He talks with great authority._

**Hardacre (Chapman):** In this graph, this column represents 23% of the population. This column represents 28% of the population, and this column represents 43% of the population.

Chapman, as he often was able to, speaks with great authority. His character Hardacre, who does not appear again in the sketch, is introduced as a member of the British government and is standing in front of a graph, however he does not say anything of substance. Generic conventions of cutting back and forth between presenters – all of whom look important and have distinguished titles – are being made fun of, but so is the content of these news shows. Through satire, Monty Python is arguing that pundits are merely people who have the ability to talk fast, but are not actually saying anything of importance.

Upon cutting back to the first presenter – Michael Palin’s bowtie-wearing character – the sketch resumes:

**Presenter:** Telling figures indeed, but what do they mean to you, what do they mean to me, what do they mean to the average man in the street? With me now is Professor Tiddles of Leeds University. *(Camera pulls out to reveal bearded professor sitting next to presenter.)*

Professor, you’ve spent many years researching into things, what do you think?

**Professor (Cleese):** I think it’s too early to tell.

**Presenter:** ‘Too early to tell’ … too early to say … it means the same thing. The word ‘say’ is the same as the word ‘tell.’ They’re not spelt the same, but they mean the same. It’s an identical situation we have with ‘ship’ and ‘boat’ *(holds up signs saying ‘ship’ and ‘boat’)* but not the same as we have with ‘bow’ and ‘bough’ *(holds up signs)*, they’re spelt differently,
mean different things but sound the same. (He holds up one sign saying ‘so’ and another saying ‘there.’) But the real question remains. What is the solution, if any, to this problem?

It is important to note that the members of the sketch have not introduced any “problem” that needs solving. Instead, the sketch thus far has all been the mixing of generic camera cuts and editing with a commentary on the fact that these pundits and presenters appear on television alongside the important and the educated without making a point. For the members of Monty Python, these fast-talking television personalities that audiences are familiar with interrupt programs for no reason besides pointing out worthless figures and asking a string of rhetorical questions as the presenter continues to do, saying, “What can we do? What am I saying? Why am I sitting in this chair? Why am I on this program? And what am I going to say next?” In character, the presenter is asking questions that Monty Python members feel an audience member should be asking. At the end of asking these questions, the presenter says that a professional cricketer will have the answer to these questions of “why.” Posing a series of questions to a famed individual is another convention of the television news program genre. News anchors are often seeking out individuals who might have an expertise. However, since it is a cricket player instead of another professor or member of the elite, it is unexpected, but not unheard of since society often positions celebrities and professional sports players as influences.

After Idle – as the Cricketer – replies, “I can say nothing at this point,” the sketch begins to reach its conclusion with Palin’s character still desperate for some answer:

**Presenter:** Well, you were wrong…Professor?

**Professor:** Hello.

**Presenter:** Hello. So…where do we stand? Where do we stand? Where do we sit? Where do we come? Where do we go? What do we do? What do we say? What do we eat? What do we drink? What do we think? What do we do?
From Palin’s long line of questions, the image cuts to stock film of a London-Brighton train that operates at up to 100 miles and covers the fifty miles between each city in two minutes. British audiences would be more familiar with this image, however, even for those audiences unfamiliar with that particular train journey, the audience does not need to recognize the specific train or know that it can cover fifty miles in two minutes to appreciate the episode.

What the image of a train does do for a universal audience is provide a transition in the episode:

*After a few seconds the train goes into a tunnel. Blackness. Loud crash.*

*Cut to signal box as before.*

**Signalman:** *(Calling out of window)* Sorry!

*He goes back to wrestling with bear.*

In the course of an episode of *Flying Circus* a character could make more than one appearance. By having a character appear repeatedly, the episode has a sense of continuity. Cleese later said, “You have to have characters that they [the audience] care about and a story they can enjoy and believe in” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 121). In other words, even though Jones as the signal man did not perform any task in the episode other than wrestling a bear in a few scenes, by reappearing throughout the episode, the character helped to connect sketches over the course of the program. Someone examining “The Naked Ant,” or any *Flying Circus* episode on a sketch-by-sketch basis would miss this repetition.

In “The Naked Ant,” superimposed captions that appear on the screen in green lettering can serve as transitions. Captions often specify locations such as Minehead in Somerset, the setting of the following sketch. To set up the sketch, the caption reads, “A small boarding house in Minehead, Somerset.” Minehead, in the south-west area of England, is known by British audiences as an area that attracts tourism for economic purposes (Clarke, 2004).
With the image of a country boarding house that is visually set up as a quiet home in the country that houses bourgeois travelers, all of whom are quiet, respectable, and seeking a short vacation from urban life. Among these quiet, unassuming travelers are Hitler, Von Ribbentrop, and Himmler. Hitler – under the assumed name Hilter, played by John Cleese, is in full Nazi uniform with a dark mustache – is planning to run an election campaign, and he has chosen Minehead as the perfect locale.

All six members of Monty Python were alive during World War II. As the oldest, Cleese was born October 27, 1939. The youngest member of Monty Python – Palin – was born May 5, 1943. For Monty Python, World War II was part of their lifetime. In 1970, when “The Naked Ant” aired, the figures were recognizable and shocking to see as characters in a television comedy. However, as shocking as the sketch might have seen at the time, the members of Monty Python regarded the “Mr. Hilter” sketch – and “The Naked Ant” as a whole – as some of the strongest comedic material of the first season. On April 24, 1970 when discussing the possibility of syndicating the series to be shown in the states, the members of Monty Python met with an American named Dick Senior (Palin, 2006). In his diary, Michael Palin wrote, “Show 12 [was] a much better looking show [than the previous episode, which Palin thought was a little slow] with ‘Hilter’ and ‘Upper Class Twits’ providing two of the most remembered items of the series” (as cited in Palin, 2006, p. 22).

“Mr. Hilter” opens with content that is dully typical. As a bourgeois traveler, Eric Idle is greeted at the front door by the landlady, played by Terry Jones. The landlady ushers Mr. Johnson (Idle) and his wife into a room where all the other guests have just been serving tea. All the while, the two are talking about arbitrary things. Mr. Johnson shares in grave detail each road he drove and how long it took him to drive down. The landlady introduces Mr. Johnson the other lodgers, including Mr. and Mrs. Phillips, explaining to Mr. Johnson that they had been vacationing to the same boarding
house for the past three years. Thus far, nothing about this particular tea-time is “Pythonic.” Everyone, thus far, is very stereotypically British and polite.

When Jones leads Idle towards a table in the foreground of the setting, the story meets unexpected characters:

**Landlady:** …And over here is Mr. Hilter.

*Over at a table, Adolf Hitler is sitting pouring over a map. He is in full Nazi uniform.*

**Himmler and Von Ribbentrop are sitting at the table with him, Himmler in a Nazi uniform and Von Ribbentrop in an evening dress, with an Iron Cross.**

**Hitler (Cleese):** Ah good time…good afternoon.

**Landlady:** Ooh planning a little excursion, are we Mr. Hilter?

**Hitler:** Ja! Ja! We make a little... (to others) Was ist rückweise bewegen?

**Von Ribbentrop (Chapman):** Hike.

**Himmler (Palin):** Hiking.

**Hitler:** We make a little hike for, for Bideford.

**Johnson:** (*Leaning over map*) Oh, well, you’ll be wanting the A39 then…no, no, you’ve got the wrong map there, this is Stalingrad, you want the Ilfracombe and Barnstaple section.

**Hitler:** Ah Hein…Reginald you have the wrong map here you silly old leg-before-wicket English person.

**Himmler:** I’m sorry mein Führer, I did not… (*Hitler slaps him*) Mein…Dickie old chum.

**Landlady:** Lucky Mr. Johnson pointed that out, eh? You wouldn’t have had much fun in Stalingrad would you… (*They don’t see the joke*) I said you wouldn’t have had much fun in Stalingrad would you, ha, ha, ha.

*Flying Circus* uses irony in this sketch: neither the landlady nor Mr. Johnson recognizes the historical figures as who they are. When the landlady introduces the blonde man in the evening gown to Mr.
Johnson as “Ron Vibbentrop,” Idle’s character tries to make a quick joke regarding the similarity of the two names:

**Johnson:** Oh not Von Ribbentrop, eh? Ha, ha, ha.

**Von Ribbentrop:** *(Leaping to two feet in fear, then realizing…)* Nein! Nein! Nein! Oh! Ha, ha, ha. No different other chap. No I in Somerset am being born Von Ribbentrop is born in Gotterammerstrasse 46, Düsseldorf, West Eight. So they say!

By being unaware of who the three gentlemen are, the members of Monty Python are mocking a class of Britons who might be familiar with the traffic congestion of each of the highways, however they have little interest in anything that is not distinctly British.

Johnson insists that the men – particularly the one introduced as Mr. Hilter – look familiar; however, he is unable to deduce exactly who each of the three are. Being 1970, the age of television, Johnson suggests that perhaps the men are actors:

**Johnson:** Haven’t I seen him on the television?

**Von Ribbentrop & Himmler:** Nicht. Nein. Nein, oh no.

**Johnson:** Television Doctor?

**Von Ribbentrop:** No! No!

With the exception of Chapman being in an evening gown – Monty Python often liked to undermine authority figures by dressing them in drag – the men are recognizable as Nazis. In the sketch, the audience is more aware than the characters themselves. Through such irony, the audience is able to recognize historical cues present in the script such as:

**Johnson:** What happens then [on Thursday]?

**Landlady:** Oh it’s the North Minehead by-election. Mr. Hilter’s standing as a National Socialist candidate. He’s got wonderful plans for Minehead.

**Johnson:** Like what?
**Landlady:** Well for a start he wants to annex Poland.

Both culturally and universally, any audience member who has had a history lesson on World War II knows that the war began in Europe in 1939 when Hitler and the Nazis invaded Poland.

While the members of Monty Python themselves are likeable – especially Michael Palin who is now referred to by some fans as “the nice Python” – they needed to make sure that Hitler, Von Ribbentrop, and Himmler were not portrayed positively. The sketch cuts to Cleese as Hitler standing on a balcony looking over the street ranting in German while Himmler stands beside him. Unlike the Nazi rallies leading up to World War II, the Minehead rally is not well-attended. The applause and cheering is prerecorded and being played from a tape by Von Ribbentrop:

**Hitler:** I am not a racialist, but, und this is a big but, we in the National Bocialist Party believe das Überleben muss gestammen sein mit der schneaky Armstrong-Jones. Historische Taunton ist Volkermeinig von Minehead.

**Himmler:** *(Stepping forward)* Mr. Hitler—Hilter, he says that historically Taunton is part of Minehead already.

*Shot of a yokel looking disbelievingly at balcony. Von Ribbentrop appears behind.*

**Von Ribbentrop:** He’s right, do you know that?

*Meanwhile back on the balcony.*

**Hitler (very excited):** Und Bridgewater ist die letzte Fühlung das wir haben in Somerset!

*Over this we hear loud applause and ‘Sieg Heils.’ The yokel, who is not applauding, turns round rather surprised to see whence cometh the applause. He sees Von Ribbentrop operating a gramophone.*

In 1970 Britain, Hitler is unable to achieve the same success as he did in pre-war Germany.

*Flying Circus* continued using man-in-the-street interview segments to link sketches. By beginning the vox pox section with the interviewer as a voice over asking, “What do you think of Mr.
Hilter’s policies?” (see chapter two, pp. 59-60) the cuts from the character to character are smooth. In addition, the same actor is able to appear as entirely different characters in a small time frame because the footage is comprised of a series of quick cuts.

After Chapman – as a Conservative candidate who merely drones on without letting anyone else express an opinion – falls backwards, the next cut is also quick. The surprise is that the quick cut does not go to another Minehead local. No longer on the street, the camera returns to a familiar studio and shows a character from earlier in “The Naked Ant” who displayed his ability to speak without substance. Palin, as the presenter, is sitting at the same desk he sat behind earlier. He appears ready to comment on the last thing the audience has seen. He says:

Foam at the mouth and fall over backwards. Is he foaming at the mouth to fall over backwards or falling over backwards to foam at the mouth? Tonight ‘Spectrum’ examines the whole question of frothing and falling, coughing and calling, Screaming and bawling, walling and stalling, galling and mauling, palling and hauling, trawling and squalling and zalling. Zalling? Is there a word zalling? If there is what does it mean…if there isn’t what does it mean? Perhaps both. Maybe neither. What do I mean by the word ‘mean?’ What do I mean by the word ‘word,’ what do I mean by ‘what do I mean,’ what do I mean by ‘do,’ and what do I do by mean? What do I do by do by do, and what do I mean by wasting your time like this? Goodnight.

As an actor, Palin is able to deliver long lines of dialogue without coming across as cheeky, as Idle often does in Flying Circus. Cleese respected Palin’s range as an actor saying, “Michael is immensely likeable and for me the best performer. […] I loved performing with him because I thought he had the biggest range” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 92). Even as the presenter, who does not have any substance to his long speeches and simply portrays his ability to rhyme words and rattle off meaningless questions, the reason Palin’s character is able to “waste [everyone’s] time” is because,
like other television presenters, his persona is likeable. In other words, audiences are willing to listen to television presenters ramble on about nothing because they are drawn to a positive characteristic of their personality.

The majority of Palin’s rambling is nonsense; however, the last word is a transition to the following sketch. As a series, *Flying Circus* has employed multiple methods to link sketches in an episode. Monty Python wished to avoid using the same micro-technique too often as doing so would create a generic convention, precisely what Monty Python set out to violate in producing *Flying Circus*. Even the most outrageous bits had to be used sparingly. Unlike other sketch comedy programs where a character is one sketch does not communicate with a character in a different sketch, immediately after Palin says, “Goodnight,” the episode cuts of a police station, and John Cleese, as a police sergeant, responds, “Goodnight.”

Similar to the sketch from “Full Frontal Nudity” about trying to buy a bed from a pair of ridiculous and absurd department store employees, the “Police Station’s Silly Voices” sketch features Terry Jones once again as a straight man trapped in the middle of absurdity. However, in “The Naked Ant,” Jones is now up against a police station filled with officers who managed to achieve positions of authority while only being able to understand others when spoken to in silly voices.

Once the transition of “Goodnight” is established, the camera zooms out to reveal Terry Jones standing across from Cleese. Jones’ character had walked into the police station to report a burglary. However, as the sergeant, Cleese is having great difficulty understanding him properly. Examined as a commentary of the lack of authority and prestige associated with policemen in *Flying Circus*, the sketch has similarities to the “Buying a Bed” sketch in “Full Frontal Nudity” in regards to the absurdity of communicating with individuals who do not understand or respond well to issues of language. By the conclusion of the sketch (explained in chapter two, pp. 50-51), characters are delivering lines in different voices, often switching quickly as Idle does when he says:
(Very deep to Sergeant Foster.) Thank you, sergeant. (Normal voice to man.) We’ll get things moving right away, sir. (He picks up the phone and dials, at the same time he shrieks in a high voice to the first sergeant.) You take over here, sergeant. (Very deep voice.) Alert all squad cars in the area. (Ridiculous sing-song voice into the phone.) Hello, Dar-ling, I’m afra-ID I sh-A-ll BE L-ate H-O-me this evening.

As it turns out, the squad car drivers only comprehend words that are sung in an operatic tenor. The sketch cuts away while Chapman is singing, “Calling all squad cars in the area.”

The sketch is strong for a television audience not only because its absurdity makes it quite funny, but also the transitions and the links to the preceding and subsequent sketches provide continuity in the episode as a whole. Following an entire sketch of silly voices, the episode continues its use of silly voices in the vox pops section that begins with a “Lovely Girl” – played by Carol Cleveland – mouthing the words while a deep, male voice that has been dubbed on says, “I think that’s in very bad taste.”

Monty Python is nothing if not fans of bad taste and of the bizarre. They not only dubbed voices, but they would also dub sound effects. First, a black and white picture of a pig is shown, and the sound of a cat meowing is played to produce incongruity. Next, dog barks are heard while an image of a giraffe is shown. Lastly, then-President of the United States – “The Naked Ant” is pre-Watergate – Richard Nixon’s photo fills the screen while the sound of sheep bleating is superimposed.

Once again cutting to a man-in-the-street interview, “The Naked Ant” transitions to the “Upper Class Twit of the Year” sketch. Dressed in character as an upper class twit, Cleese speaks in a voice that is extremely difficult to understand. He says, “Some people do talk in the most extraordinary way.” All college-educated, the members of Monty Python – as well as the college-educated cult following Flying Circus gained in its first season – can see the irony and humor in a character that does not have any vocal clarity commenting on how other people often sound strange
when they speak. And as a transition, the character Cleese appears as in this brief clip is a character that is part of the sketch that immediately follows.

At the time, Monty Python did not realize how well-loved the “Upper Class Twit of the Year” sketch would be for generations of fans. The sketch combines a parody of sporting events with contempt for the upper class Britons from the perspective of the educated, hardworking middle class. Comprised of a series of “athletic” events and Cleese’s disembodied voice as the commentator, the sketch opens to the image of the five competitive twits taking the field in a large, open stadium known as Hurlingham Park, a real multi-use stadium in London (Life of Python, 1999). Often the home of rugby and football (soccer) matches, in “The Naked Ant” Hurlingham Park sees a competition that no sports fan would expect.

Once the starter gun goes off – twice, because the first time the competitors did not know they were supposed to begin – Vivian Smith-Smythe-Smith, Simon-Zinc-Trumpet-Harris, Nigel Incubator-Jones, Gervaise Brook-Hampster, and Oliver St. John-Mollusc compete in events that Hurlingham Park has not seen before or since. Among these events are: walking in a straight line, jumping over a matchboxes piled three-high in a line, kicking the beggar, reversing a sports car into an old lady, awaking the neighbor, and more. While the commentator does a high-spirited narration of the actions of the five competitors – portrayed by Idle, Jones, Cleese, Palin, and Chapman – nothing seen in the competition is remotely athletic in nature. However, a crowd of eight has come out to cheer on their favorites. Cleese’s voice over as the commentator matches the tone of other television sports commentators; however, the lack of difficulty in any of the obstacles – for a person with normal motor function, that is – are a mockery of sporting competitions.

While any of the five competitors qualify as “twits,” Chapman clearly is in a league above the rest – however, because he runs himself over with a car, he does not complete the race and win. Looking back, Palin found Chapman to be a strong performer because Chapman would “add this
wonderful mad streak throughout” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 82). Terry Gilliam noted that Chapman was “out there” (as cited in Morgan, p. 92) in real life and therefore Chapman was able to embrace characters like Oliver St. John-Mollusc without his alcoholism taking away too much quality from the work. Beginning right from the “fast start,” Chapman and the others look ridiculous.

In the series, it was rare that Cleese and Chapman wrote sketches that were visual. The two were known better for their confrontation sketches. The “Upper Class Twit of the Year” sketch is largely visual with the reaction of the commentator adding to the humor. For example, early on the sketch, all the competitors must complete the matchbox jump, meaning they need to jump over a line of matchboxes piled three boxes high for a total height of just under three inches. With the height of the performers ranging for 5’8 (Jones) to 6’5 (Cleese), completing this task should be simple. What the audience sees on film is five strange-looking men sometimes having to take a running start to jump over matches. Visually, Chapman is especially humorous. At 6’3, the actor would only need to step over, however while walking on the heels of his feet, his character is having the greatest amount of difficulty with this portion of the event, often squawking and falling face forward on top of the matchboxes.

What adds to the humor of Oliver St. John-Mollusc having difficulty jumping over the matchboxes is the spoken narration from the commentator. Over the image of repeatedly failing to clear the matchboxes, the commentator says, “There’s Oliver now, he’s at the back. I think he’s having a little trouble with his old brain injury; he’s going to have a go. No, no, bad luck. He’s up. He doesn’t know when he’s beaten, this boy. He doesn’t know when he’s winning either. He doesn’t have any sort of sensory apparatus.” Because the characters are all confined to Hurlingham Park, the location is not particularly funny. It is the characters’ interaction with their environment and their gestures that are each narrated by a high-spirited commentator that create humor beyond simple satire. In other words, the “Upper-Class Twit of the Year Competition” is not only a visual artifact meant to
make fun of the upper-class Britons, but the behavior of each of the performers levels out to create enjoyment for the audience on a level of sheer clownish interactions. The performers create humor through their exaggerated behavior.

Movement can invoke laughter in others (Bergson, 1928). One of the strengths of using a mass medium – television – to produce comedy is that the visual and the auditory can be combined for a larger audience. As a performer, Cleese thought that he was most successful and well-liked in films and on television, rather than on-stage. He said, “The moment I appeared on television something else happened, and I can only assume that some of the acting stuff I did worked better in close-up than it did from the tenth row” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 15). It is the medium that makes the ending of the sketch – and the link – possible because of cutting. While other sketch comedy programs adhere to the generic convention of ending a sketch with a blackout, following the final event – one that requires the twits to shoot themselves – another “letter from the public” transitions to one of Gilliam’s animations. Read in Jones’ voice, the letter reads, “Dear Sir, how splendid it is to see the flower of British manhood wiping itself out of with such pluck and tenacity. Britain need have no fear with leaders of this caliber. If only a few of the so-called working classes could destroy themselves so sportingly. Yours etc., Brigadier Mainwaring Smith Smith Smith etc. Deceased etc. P.S. etc. Come on other ranks, show your stuff.” A Brigadier is a senior rank in the British Army and Royal Marines. The link of the British army is seen Gilliam’s animation that pictures the cut out of a soldier coughing.

In Gilliam’s animation, the soldier coughs three times. The first time nothing happens. A voice off screen says, “No, not good enough again.” The second cough causes the soldiers leg to fall off. Once again, the voice encourages the soldier to try again. Finally, with a third cough the soldier completely disintegrates. This seems to please the disembodied voice, who says, “Yes, that’s better.” From here, Monty Python uses “The Naked Ant” to experiment with editing techniques:
A hand picks up the animated bits and we see Terry Jones stuffing them into a pipe. He puts the pipe down and various strange beasties climb out of it.

Cartoon link into still of beautiful country house. ‘Hearts of Oak’-type music. The camera tracks into the house and mixes to: close-up of distinguished, noble father and gay, innocent, beautiful daughter – a delicately beautiful English rose.

**Father (Chapman):** Now I understand you want to marry my daughter?

Pull out to reveal that he is addressing a ghastly thing: a grubby, smelly, brown mackintoshed shambles, unshaven with a continuous hacking cough, and an obscene leer. He sits on the sofa in this beautiful elegant lounge.

**Shabby (Palin) (sniffing and coughing):** That’s right…yeah…yeah.

Animation and live action are interlaced in the link that leads up to the “Ken Shabby” sketch.

Both in responses and in form, the Ken Shabby sketch provides shock and incongruity. It is best remembered for the following exchange between the father and Ken Shabby:

**Father:** And, er, what job do you do?

**Shabby:** I clean out public lavatories.

**Father:** Is there a promotion involved?

**Shabby:** Oh yeah, yeah. (*He produces at handkerchief and clears throat horribly into it.*)

After five years they give me a brush.

The sketch continues with Shabby apologizing for “[gobbing] on [the] carpet” and stating his plans to marry Rosamund – played by Connie Booth – to marry as soon as possible and live in his grandmother’s basement as there is now room because some of the polecats she trains have died. Often times when the members of Monty Python could not find a good ending for a sketch, they would abandon it or have another character interrupt it (*Life of Python, 1999*). Intentionally refusing to think of a line to follow Shabby’s cry of “Oh, diarrhea” and subsequent coughing fit, the tone of the
sketch changed to a photo caption sequence while Cleese provided a summation to go along with each photo:

**Voice Over:** The story so far: Rosamund’s father has become ensnared by Mr. Shabby’s extraordinary personal magnetism. Bob and Janet have eaten Mr. Farquar’s goldfish during an Oxfam lunch, and Mrs. Elsmore’s marriage is threatened by Doug’s insistence that he is on a different level of consciousness. Louise’s hernia has been confirmed, and Jim, Bob’s brother, has run over the editor of the ‘Lancet’ on his way to see Jenny, a freelance Pagoda designer. On the other side of the continent Napoleon still broods over the smoldering remains of a city he had crossed half the earth to conquer…

*Mix from photo captions to studio.*

*Caption:* ‘A corner of a bed-sitter.’

*A girl in a bra and pants goes over to television and switches it on.*

**Voice Over:** …whilst Mary, Roger’s half sister, settles down to watch television…

Those who enjoy watching television series are familiar with the generic role that Cleese is filling with his voice-over. Often in a television series, a disembodied voice updates the audience on the past actions of as many characters as they can.

Monty Python uses the montage to transition to the final sketch of the episode, “Falling Ministers.” When Mary switched on the television, a caption read “A political party broadcast on behalf of the Wood Party.” Immediately afterwards, the camera cut to a studio where Graham Chapman plays a minister – in Britain the term refers to a politician, not only a religious figure – in a traditional gray suit, prepared to tell the voting public why they need to fight the present Local Government Bill. The minister’s plea – on behalf of the fictitious Wood Party – is not alarming until he crashes through the Earth’s crust:
Man (Idle): Hello! Helllllllllllllllllooooooo! (To camera) Er I, I’m afraid the minister’s fallen through the Earth’s crust. Er…excuse me a moment. (Goes and looks at pit.) Helloooo.

Minister: (Unseen, a long way down.) Helloooooo.

Man: Are you all right minister?

Minister: I appear to have landed on a kind of ledge thing.

Though impossible, Flying Circus presented a reality where absurdity coincided with the mundane. In other words, a political broadcast is highly mundane – and beginning in the early-1960s, also a relatively frequent aspect of television – however, by having Chapman fall through the crust, the situation draws upon absurdity.

For the minister who has fallen through the Earth’s crust, he has remembered that he is on live television and is therefore insistent on carrying on, not even remotely panicked by his situation:

Minister (off-screen, still a long way down): In the meantime, since I am on all channels, perhaps I’d better carry on with this broadcast by shouting about our housing plans from down here as best I can. Could someone throw me down a script? (Man drops the script down and Tex – a rare appearance by Gilliam – appears with enormous coil of rope.) The script would appear to have landed on a different ledge somewhat out of my grasp, don’t you know. […] Well I’m going to carry on, if I can read the script.

He swings over to a ledge opposite with a script on it. As he gets near, he peers and starts reading.

Minister: Good evening. We in the Wood party (he swings away and then back) feel very strongly about (swings away and back) the present weak drafting of the Local Government Bill and no, no – it’s no good, it’s not working…I think I’ll have to make a grab for it. Ah. There we are. (He swings over and grabs the script with one hand; he tries to turn to camera and continues.) Good evening. We in the Wood Party feel very strongly about the present—
(He makes a vigorous gesture and in doing so, he lets go of rope and slips so that he is now hanging upside down.) Agh, agh. Oh dear. Hello!

**Man (off screen):** Hello.

**Minister:** Look, look, I must look a bit of a chump hanging upside down like this.

**Man (off screen):** Don’t worry minister.

The solution offered is to turn the picture upside down. This action results in the minister’s once-neatly pressed suit now hanging askew and the caption with the minister’s name appearing upside down on the screen. The sketch suggests that the BBC was not prepared to handle live television. However, in the interest of getting a televised news conference out of anything, “The Naked Ant” cuts to a discussion between three men, all named Robert – played by (in order) Jones, Idle, and Cleese – who are discussing the furthest distance a minister has ever fallen.

The three Roberts speculate and share their opinion much as teams of news anchors often do. As the bit draws to an end “The Naked Ant” revisits characters from earlier in the episode:

**First Robert (Jones):** Thank you, Robert. Well, that seems to be about all we have time for tonight. Unless anyone has anything else to say. Has anyone anything else to say?

*Various ‘noes’ plus one ‘bloody fairy’ and more noes, from a very rapid montage of all the possible characters in this week’s show saying ‘no.’ The last one we come to is the ‘Spectrum’ presenter. He says more than no.*

**Presenter:** What do we mean by no, what do we mean by yes, what do we mean by no, no, no? Tonight ‘Spectrum’ looks at the whole question of what is no—

*The sixteen-ton weight falls on him. Cut to It’s-Man running away.*

The final montage is able to connect the episode into one cohesive program. The falling of a sixteen-ton weight on top of another character is used in other episodes of *Flying Circus*. It is also an example
of surprise humor as the audience does not expect the weight to fall, and when it does they laugh
because their expectations were violated.

Archaeology Today: “I love animals. That’s why I like to kill ’em.”

The twenty-first episode of Flying Circus aired on BBC-1 on November 17, 1970 as part of
the second season. Beginning immediately with the BBC-1 globe symbol, “Archaeology Today” set
up the episode by creating a parody of the television channel. Chapter two (pp. 43-44) discussed the
“Trailer” sketch in detail regarding each of the BBC and cultural icons. While the content of Idle’s
monologue can be expressed as direct attack on some of the familiar faces of the BBC, the playing of
Grandstand’s signature theme transitions immediately into the recognizable tune that is the theme
music for Flying Circus. The opening animation goes as expected: flowers growing out of a man’s
head, a half-man-half-chicken hatching and going through a series of machines before finally being
crushed by a huge foot. It is at the end of the opening to “Archaeology Today” that the animation that
has now been seen for twenty episodes takes an unexpected turn. It is an event that also links the
opening animation to the opening sketch: the foot that crushed the chicken-man crumbles.

A different ending to the opening title animations not only violates expectations, but it also
establishes a link to the opening of the next sketch. Still in the form of animation, the pieces of the foot
begin to dissipate into the ground. A cartoon building is constructed and music from the roaring
twenties briefly plays. Animation has the ability to speed up time and present time as passing at a
faster rate. Therefore, as quickly as the music began, it stops and the building is condemned. Finally,
Gilliam illustrated cranes and bulldozers; a disembodied voice exclaims “Look what I found,” and the
audience can presume that a piece of the foot has been dug up. As this is such an amazing find, the bit
of the foot is brought to the British museum – still in animation – so that others may be impressed.
The next shot reveals the tip of the big toe and a disembodied voice noting that they have done
research and successfully reconstructed the artifact to its original form. The audience is expected to
see a foot on display in the museum. However, as the camera zooms out to reveal the finished product, the big toe has been attached to the face of a woolly mammoth.

The image of the mammoth with the toe at the end of its nose transitions to the next sketch when the words “Archaeology Today” appear on the left side of the screen. Following the animated title sequence, the image on display was a bizarre-looking artifact that had failed to be put together properly. Yet, with the appearance of a title on the screen, the image becomes representative of a television interview show. As Terry Jones said in 1999, *Flying Circus* allowed the members of Monty Python to use a “stream-of-conscious narrative […] where animation flowed right into sketches and sketches into animation” (*Life of Python*, 1999) rather than the generic expectation of ending sketch with black-outs and having the segments of an episode be separated from one another and exclusive in content.

In *Flying Circus*, Monty Python mocked several different forms of television shows. They questioned the celebrity television interview as a form of sharing information with the public, convinced that the population should not depend on the television – and more specifically the television interview – to learn about the world. Monty Python questioned the status of the television interviewer and would often present them as firing off meaningless questions. In “The Naked Ant” Palin represented this fast-talker. “Archaeology Today” used Palin once again as a television interviewer who berated his two guests, and was more concerned with how tall people were than their contributions to the study of archaeology.

The opening presentation of the sketch does not appear bizarre; Cleese, Palin, and Jones are all in a studio. The members of Monty Python depended on the audience to be aware that “in conventional interviews on television, the personalities are questioned by a seemingly dignified interviewer about their lives, the influences on their work, and its ‘meaning’” (Landy, 2005, p. 45) so that the generic expectations could be violated by what actually occurs in the sketch. The opening
polite salutations go as expected for the television interview. Yet, Monty Python enjoyed breaking conventions and thought that television – including sketch comedy – shows that catered to generic expectations were “cliché” (*Life of Python*, 1999). When *Flying Circus* mocked the television interview, “the interview often becomes an exercise in trivialization and humiliation” (Landy, 2005, p. 45). Immediately after Jones’ character says, “Good evening,” Palin as the interview moves the sketch away from archaeology to trivial aspects of the guests themselves:

**Interviewer:** How tall are you, professor?

**Kastner (Jones):** …I beg your pardon?

**Interviewer:** How tall are you?

**Kastner:** I’m about five foot ten.

**Interviewer:** (*He returns to the introductory script*) …and an expert in Egyptian tomb paintings. Sir Robert… (*He turns back to Kastner and breaks script.*) Are you really five foot ten?

**Kastner:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Funny, you look much shorter than that to me. Are you slumped forward in your chair at all?

**Kastner:** No, er I—

**Interviewer:** Extraordinary. Sir Robert Eversley, who’s just returned from the excavations in El Ara, and you must be well over six foot. Isn’t that right, Sir Robert?

**Sir Robert (Cleese) (puzzled):** Yes.

**Interviewer:** In fact, I think you’re six foot five aren’t you?

**Sir Robert:** Yes.

*Canned applause from off. Sir Robert looks up in amazement.*
The only time that Monty Python used canned laughter and applause in *Flying Circus* was so they could illustrate the technique used by other comedy programs as being a poor invention of television comedy by clapping and laughing at events that do not deserve that highly regarded response, such as Cleese being six foot five. The sketch continues with Palin disseminating respect and admiration based on height:

**Interviewer:** Oh, that’s marvelous. I mean you’re a totally different kind of specimen to Professor Kastner: straight in your seat, erect, firm—

**Sir Robert:** Yes, I thought we were here to discuss archaeology.

**Interviewer:** Yes, yes, of course we are, yes, absolutely. You’re absolutely right! That’s positive thinking for you. *(To Kastner)* You wouldn’t have said a thing like that, would you? You five-foot-ten weed. *(He turns his back very ostentatiously on Kastner.)* Sir Robert Eversley, who’s very interesting, what have you discovered in the excavations at El Ara?

**Sir Robert:** *(He picks up a beautiful ancient vase.)* Well, basically, we have found a complex of tombs—

**Interviewer:** Very good speaking voice.

**Sir Robert:** …which present dramatic evidence of Polynesian influence in Egypt in the third dynasty, which is quite remarkable.

**Interviewer:** How tall were the Polynesians?

**Kastner:** They were—

**Interviewer:** Sh!

**Sir Robert:** Well, they were rather small, seafaring—

**Interviewer:** Short men, were they…eh? All squat and bent up?

**Sir Robert:** Well, I really don’t know about that—

**Interviewer:** Who were the tall people?
The interviewer is now irritating both Sir Robert and Kastner. The two guests are trapped by the interviewer’s obsession with height and his fascination with a tall African tribe, exclaiming happily, “Eight foot of solid Watutsi! That’s what I call tall!” When Kastner breaks down into sobs telling the interviewer, “You can keep your bloody Watutsi! I’d rather had my little body…my little five-foot-ten inch body,” the sketch takes yet another unexpected turn.

Throughout the opening of the sketch, Palin’s character had given six-foot-five – Cleese’s actual height – Sir Robert the utmost respect. However, once Jones’ character has fallen to the floor in desperate despair, Cleese’s character is now the one using his height to justify his character as the one to be admired:


Interviewer: Don’t bloody fool me.

Sir Robert: I’ll do what I like, because I’m six foot five and I eat punks like you for breakfast.

Sir Robert floors the interviewer with an almighty punch. Interviewer looks up rubbing his jaw.

Interviewer: I’ll get you for that Eversley! I’ll get you if I have to travel to the four corners of the earth!

Although the sketch transitions to a new location, the characters have not gone away. “Archaeology Today” is now playing with time and space. While in the studio, the year was never acknowledged, assuming that it was present day (1970) or at the very least a time when the majority of the population owned a television. However, following Palin’s threat, Flying Circus uses a crash of music and captions – similar to captions used in Western films – read, “Flaming Star – the story of one man’s search for vengeance in the raw and violent world of international archaeology.” Apart from the Indiana Jones franchise – that Flying Circus predated – archaeology is not perceived as a very
dangerous occupation. However, in “Archaeology Today,” the members of Monty Python opted for allowing the characters to travel back in time in order to parody the Western movie genre by removing the cowboys putting and in their place archaeologists and television interviewers who were wronged by the other characters.

The sketch is not a direct parody of Westerns: it takes place in Egypt in 1920 – as explained by captions and stock film of the pyramids. The characters have gone back in time. They are now dressed in twenties clothes. However, to differentiate the sketch from other programs that use history in their sketches, the characters remember the goings-on of the television interview that took place earlier. Sir Robert and Danielle – played by Carol Cleveland – have just found a “Sumerian drinking vessel of the fourth dynasty,” and in an overly-dramatic response, have chosen to sing about it, and then the sketch turns to violence mixed with bizarre humor:

Sir Robert and Danielle are just about to embrace, when there is a jarring chord and a long crash. The interviewer, in the clothes he wore before, is standing on the edge of the dig.

Interviewer: All right Eversley, get up out of that trench.

Sir Robert: Don’t forget…I’m six foot five.

Interviewer: That doesn’t worry me…Kastner!

He snaps his fingers. From behind him Professor Kastner appears, fawningly.

Kastner: Here Lord.

Interviewer: Up!

He snaps his fingers and Kastner leaps onto his shoulders.

Sir Robert: Eleven foot three!

Kastner: I’m so tall! I’m so tall!

Sir Robert: Danielle!

Danielle leaps on his shoulders.
**Interviewer**: Eleven foot six – damn you!

Trying to outdo one another, Palin’s character and Cleese’s character each end up with two individuals on their shoulders. At this point, none of the characters are behaving as their environment dictates. Instead, the sketch has turned to chaos as they run at each other and antique pottery breaks amongst their shuffle. Finally:

*The interviewer crawls up to camera and produces a microphone from his pocket. He is covered in blood and in his final death throes.*

**Interviewer**: And there we end this edition of ‘Archaeology Today.’ Next week, the Silbury Dig by Cole Porter with Pearl Bailey and Arthur Negus. *(He dies.)*

Violence is not used in *Flying Circus* to provide gore, rather it is for shock. In fact, most of the violent acts – not including capabilities with animation – include characters running at one another and yelling. Therefore, this is not an illustration of violence as it is an example of humor as incongruity. Logically, characters running at one another – while unarmed – do not incite violence as much as it raises questions of sanity. The members of Monty Python were not against appearing to be lunatics.

Now that the audience has seen the members of Monty Python charging at one another from atop Cleese’s and Palin’s shoulders, it seems appropriate that the follow-up will be a plea for sanity. The camera cuts to a close-up of Chapman as a vicar sitting in a studio. As a voice over, Palin announces, “And now an appeal for sanity from the Reverend Arthur Belling.” In spite of his alcoholism, Chapman always appeared distinguished and professional at first glance. Because of his professional appearance, his behavior was often incongruent with the tweed-wearing, serious professional visual impression.

On television, Chapman’s persona was an excellent use of absurdist humor. His ability to move to the world of the unexplained and incongruent was representative of *Flying Circus*’ style of television comedy. In 2005, Cleese – who would often complain to the others – about having to write
between eighty and ninety-five percent of the material he wrote with Chapman (Morgan, 1999; Palin, 2006) – said that Chapman was “able to lob in strange off-the-wall ideas that would add so much to the sketch” (Graham Chapman’s Personal Best, 2005). Chapman was also admired by the other members of Monty Python for his “squawking ability” (Life of Python, 1999). In other words, Chapman was able to do surprising and shocking things in the middle of his performance by making strange noises. As he pleads for a savior from all of the sanity plaguing the universe, the vicar’s insanity increases exponentially:

> It is up to people like you and me who are out of our tiny little minds to try and help these people overcome their sanity. You can start in small ways with ping-pong ball eyes and a funny voice. And then you can paint half your body red and the other half green. And then you can jump up and down in a bowl of treacle going, ‘squawk, squawk, squawk…’ And then you can go ‘Neurhhh! Neurhh!’ And then you can roll around on the floor going ‘ping pting pting pting…’

Off camera, Chapman took a similar stance on saving those from the sanity they might experience in their everyday lives. At a charity soccer match, he arrived dressed as the Colonel and made a nuisance of himself by disrupting the game and lying in the goal post (Chapman, 2006b). At BBC cocktail parties, Chapman would drink too much – in addition, he would often drink prior to arriving – and end up crawling on the floor and biting people’s ankles (Graham Chapman’s Personal Best, 2005). In Flying Circus, humor and laughter were often generated through the members of Monty Python behaving in strange ways that violated expectations.

From Chapman’s absurd plea for sanity, Palin’s voice provides a transition to the next monologue. Palin says, “The Reverend Arthur Belling is Vicar of St. Loony Up the Cream Bun and Jam. And now, an appeal on behalf of the National Trust.” In Britain, the National Trust used radio and television announcements to request donations so that their organization might continue.
Chapman was good at acting absurd to go against his initial professional appearance. Meanwhile, Idle – by his own admission – could play the “cheeky spinster” (Life of Python, 1999). As explained in chapter two (pp. 64-65), the opening of this monologue is Idle as a well-groomed woman trying to make a plea for the National Trust, but having great difficulty remembering her name. In the middle of the monologue, the phone rings and the audience assumes by Idle’s character’s reactions that someone is on the other line telling the woman what her name is.

Now that the phone has rung, the expectation is that the issue at hand has been cleared up. Therefore, the woman should now be prepared to make her appeal on behalf of the charity. However, rhetorically the repetition is a way to generate laughter and comedy. The audience might expect the woman to continue assuming that the person on the phone has cleared up her uncertainty, but Idle was not ready to behave in such accordance to audience expectations:

Hello, Denis Compton here. No, no…I should have written it down. Now where’s that number? (As she looks in her bag, she talks to herself.) I’m Mao Tse Tung…I’m P.P. Arnold…I’m Margaret Thatcher…I’m Sir Gerald Nabarro… (She dials.) Hello? Sir Len Hutton here. Could you tell me, please…oh, am I? Oh, thank you. (She puts the phone down.)

Good evening. I’m Mrs. What-number-are-you-dialing-please.

Monty Python had to be careful to use bits and jokes sparingly throughout the series. In “Archaeology Today,” Idle as the woman who does not know her name uses universal and cultural references. The monologue can easily go much longer with the addition of more names, fruits, and activities. However, doing so would cause the monologue to become tedious by overusing the humor, thus resulting in a negative effect. Therefore, before the monologue can become tedious, Terry Gilliam – as a boxer – rushes in and punches the woman. As happened with the interviewer at the beginning of the episode, one punch knocks Idle down.
"Flying Circus" did not only use repetition in monologues and sketches, but also by reusing certain images. One of these images is a piece of black-and-white film footage featuring rows of older women – all in dresses and hats – applauding. This short clip was often inserted between sketches. It often followed images of violence or nudity, all of which these older women would not actually applaud. By inserting this clip, the members of Monty Python were able to transition from sketch-to-sketch without having to write a link in the script. This clip allows “Trading in Your Bride” to immediately follow “An Appeal on Behalf of the National Trust.”

Written by Eric Idle, “Trading in Your Bride” is a sketch that allows Idle to play “an overly optimistic character” (Life of Python, 1999) who desires to work the system to benefit him. Idle argues that he should be allowed to trade in his bride because the one he had married originally was a mistake:

**Man (Idle):** I was here on Saturday, getting married to a blond girl, and I’d like to change please. I’d like to have this one instead please. [...] The other one wasn’t any good, so I’d like to swap it for this one, please. Er, I have paid. I paid on Saturday. Here’s the ticket. *(He hands over the marriage license.)*

**Registrar (Jones):** Ah, ah, no. That was when you were married.

**Man:** Er, yes. That was when I was married to the wrong one. I didn’t like the color. This is the one I want to have, so if you could just change the forms round I can take this one back with me now.

**Registrar:** I can’t do that.

**Man:** Look, make it simpler, I’ll pay again.

**Registrar:** No, you can’t do that.

For Idle’s character, he does not comprehend why he is having a difficult time getting what he wants. In the sketch, he does not raise his voice or become agitated in any way. Instead, his character truly
believes that any individual should be able to trade in their bride. After all, the man does not see a
difference between trading in a wife with returning a record player. The sketch continues with
reference made to Harrods, a famous British department store that sells various items:

**Registrar:** I’m sorry sir, but we’re not allowed to change.

**Man:** You can at Harrods.

**Registrar:** You can’t.

**Man:** You can. I changed my record player and there wasn’t a grumble.

**Registrar:** It’s different.

**Man:** And I changed my pet snake. And I changed my Robin Day tie.

**Registrar:** Well, you can’t change your bloody wife!

**Man:** Oh, all right! Well, can I borrow one for the weekend?

**Registrar:** No!

**Man:** Oh, blimey, I only wanted a jolly good—

In “Archaeology Today” the members of Monty Python once again opt to interrupt some sketches as a
form of abandoning them. With both Chapman and Cleese being able to play authority figures –
largely because of their height – Cleese runs in as a referee, blowing a whistle. To Idle’s character, he
demands, “All right, break it up. What’s your number?” Next, Cleese forcefully turns Idle around and
the audience sees that the number eight is on the back of his jacket. The reason for Idle’s character
having a number on the back of his jacket is never explained or acknowledged beyond Cleese asking
Idle what his number is.

In “Archaeology Today,” performers were aware of being on a television show. This too is
different than other typical sketch comedy programs. *Flying Circus* showed performers who were
often waiting for their sketch to begin. When Cleese runs on screen as the whistle-blowing referee,
“Archaeology Today” quickly cuts to where Chapman and Palin are waiting for their sketch to begin
in a television studio. The two men are seen looking at the camera and waiting patiently. The audience expects their sketch to begin since they have seen them on screen. However, in “Archaeology Today” the camera cuts back to Cleese, Idle, and Jones, violating audience expectations. Once Cleese has finished arresting Idle, he blows his whistle and Palin and Chapman are on screen once again. Now, the two begin the “Doctor Darling” sketch.

“Doctor Darling” is a short sketch made up of thirteen lines going back and forth between Palin and Chapman. Within these thirteen lines, incongruity and violated generic expectations occur. To begin, the two characters go back and forth trying to properly record Chapman’s character’s name:

**Doctor (Palin):** Mr. Watson.

**Watson (Chapman):** Ah, no, Doctor.

**Doctor:** Mr. Doctor.

**Watson:** No, not Mr., Doctor.

**Doctor:** Oh, Dr. Doctor.

**Watson:** No, Dr. Watson.

**Doctor:** Oh, Dr. Watson Doctor.

**Watson:** Oh just call me darling.

Chapman’s line violates the pattern that had been created between the two characters. It causes incongruity, and thus generates laughter. Chapman’s request to be called darling does not fit with the previous exchange. Instead, the request seems to come out of nowhere, something Chapman was always good at in terms of writing (*Graham Chapman’s Personal Best*, 2005).

“Doctor Darling” only has thirteen lines. This is a result of the sketch being abandoned. Unlike other sketches, no third character enters and interrupts. Rather, after Palin’s character does as Chapman’s character wishes and says, “Hello Dr. Darling,” a whistle – the same as the one from earlier – is blown and the words “That sketch has been abandoned” instantly appear on a black screen.
Even though the “Doctor Darling” sketch had been abandoned, “Archaeology Today” did not completely disregard it. In order to transition into the animation that followed, a disembodied voice said, “But at Wembley, play continued.” An image of the original Wembley stadium – the famous soccer stadium that opened in Wembley, a suburb to the northwest of London, in 1922 – appeared on screen. Next, a soccer ball – one that was the same size of the stadium itself – was dropped in. In his animation, Gilliam manipulated size in order to create incongruity. Initially, there is nothing funny or odd about a soccer ball in Wembley stadium; however, with animation Flying Circus could feature soccer balls that were the same size of the stadium.

Even before he started working on creating animations for Flying Circus, Gilliam’s animations progressed as a stream-of-consciousness. From the stadium, the animation leads to a tale of violence of gangsters – particularly Eggs Diamond, a rooster in a fedora, pinstripe pants, and wing-tipped shoes. Gilliam’s medium allowed for dream-like images, and his position as “one of the Pythons” rather than an “outside animator” (Life of Python, 1999) allowed him to be present at the writing meetings. Because Gilliam knew what sketches were going to be in the episode, his animations could lead right into a sketch. In “Archaeology Today,” Gilliam’s gangster animation ends with the image of the cover of a book that informs the reader of various tales of the gangster. In the next sketch, “The Gits,” the first image is Gilliam himself, sitting and reading a book of the same title. This subtle link is not acknowledged because the members of Monty Python desired their audience to be clever enough to notice. The acknowledgement of the transition would take away from the verbal humor of “The Gits.”

A British insult, the term “git” does not have a concrete meaning. It is most often used as a way to follow an insult in order to achieve a more specific meaning. This occurs when the host of a party – played by Chapman – introduces his friend John Stokes to his neighbor, “A Snivelling Little Rat-Faced Git.” Each of the Gits is assigned a first name that not only adds to the insult of the term
“git,” but also initially produces superiority humor – or laughing at others in order to position yourself as better in some fashion – because the audience laughs at the characters’ names. Superiority humor turns to incongruity humor. The audience would never expect that the Gits would be aware of the insult of their names. However, Terry Jones – as Mr. Git – immediately looks to Palin’s character – John Stokes – and says, “Hello, I noticed a slight look of anxiety cross your face for a moment just then, but you needn’t worry – I’m used to it. That’s the trouble with having a surname like Git.” The sketch moves away from superiority towards the grotesque by becoming outrageously absurd:

Mr. Git: We did think once of having it changed by deed-poll, you know – to Watson of something like that. But A Snivelling Little Rat-Faced Watson’s just as bad, eh?

John: Yes, yes, I suppose so.

Mrs. Git (Cleese) approaches.

Mr. Git: Oh, that’s my wife. Darling! Come and meet Mr…. what was it?


Mr. Git: Oh yes. John Stokes, this is my wife, Dreary Fat Boring Old.

John: Oh, er, how do you do?

Mrs. Git: How do you do?

Palin’s character was not expecting Cleese as Mrs. Git to have an absurd first name. In addition, nobody expected Cleese to deliver his line in his normal voice. Like the others, Cleese would play women in various sketches. While Cleese was never as good at playing a woman as Terry Jones, who Palin described as “a lovely sort of homely mum-like figure” (Life of Python, 1999), in other sketches, Cleese has used a falsetto voice to play female characters. However, in “The Gits” Cleese spoke in his normal voice. Cleese’s tone allows the humor to grow because it violates expectations.

“The Gits” continues as Mrs. Stokes – played by Carol Cleveland – meets the Gits. From there, fantastically grotesque comments include the name of the Gits’ children – “Dirty Lying Little
Two-Faced” and “Ghastly Spotty Horrible Vicious Little” – and the fact that the family has recently painted the outside of their house “with warm pus.” John Stokes and Mrs. Stokes continue to grow more and more uncomfortable by the conversation. When Palin – as a voice over – reads a caption that appears on the screen saying, “And now a nice version of that same sketch,” the episode “Archaeology Today” employs humor through repetition.

Monty Python was not only successful in generating laughter through a violation of generic expectations; they were also successful in using repetition as a rhetorical device. When the voice over introduces a clean version of the sketch, the audience sees the same party location – beginning with the transition from a shot of the book then panning out to reveal Jones, Chapman, and Palin – as before:

**Host (Graham Chapman):** John! Allow me to introduce our next-door neighbor. John, this is Mr. Watson.

**Watson (Terry Jones):** Hello. I noticed a slight look of anxiety cross your face just then but you needn’t worry.

The audience does not see the entire sketch played out again. Instead, the camera cuts to Carol Cleveland as a nun who says, “I preferred the dirty version.” It is unexpected for a nun to have such an opinion because of the image society created of nuns. Even more unexpected is Gilliam’s return as the boxer who, like earlier in “Archaeology Today,” runs over and knocks out the nun. Once again, the group of older women is seen applauding this action.

In “Archaeology Today,” violence is followed by more violence as the next sketch parodies television hunting shows. As Hank Spim, Chapman is in outback hunting gear walking through a wooded area. He is prepared for a day of hunting dangerous game. Chapman adopts an Australian accent – although it is not as good as Idle’s – and speaks directly to the camera, acknowledging the presence of the camera man, as done in a generic hunting show. Chapman says, “Well, I’ve been a
hunter all my life. I love animals. That’s why I like to kill ‘em. I wouldn’t kill an animal I didn’t like.” Chapman’s statement is humor as incongruity. Game hunters – or hunters who kill animals for sport – are not presented in society as people who like animals; they certainly do not love them. However, Hank and his brother Roy – played by Idle in a more convincing Australian accent – use their love of animals to justify hunting. An outrageous statement such as above is one of the many examples of incongruity in the sketch.

The sketch familiarizes the audience with generic conventions of television hunting shows. The sketch uses voice-of-god voice-overs – done by Cleese – in order to narrate the events. In addition, it uses dramatic music and eye-line-match shots – when the camera zooms in on a person’s eye and then cuts to a different shot to imply that the character is seeing something – to establish generic conventions and set up a violation of generic expectations. Generic parodies rely on familiarizing the audience with expectations of a genre so that humor can exist when these expectations are either not met or explicitly violated. Through this violation, “Mosquito Hunters” fulfills the humor’s function as incongruity.

Although a few conventions are present, the dialogue and content – both spoken and visual – of the sketch violate expectations with absurdity. Cleese’s first voice over announcement sets the brothers up to be brave, rugged, and out to tackle the strongest and scariest of beasts. However, after Cleese’s builds audience expectations by saying, “Hank and Roy Spim are tough, fearless backwoodsmen who have chosen to live in a violent, unrelenting world of nature’s creatures, where only the fittest survive,” he does not proceed with a logical statement. Instead, Cleese concludes the voice over introduction by explaining, “Today they are off to hunt mosquitoes.”

Neither Hank nor Roy acknowledges the absurdity of the situation. They interact with their environment as though it is logical to carry around large bazooka guns in order to terminate mosquitoes. Eric Idle, as Roy, speaks in a serious tone when he tells the cameraman – and thus, the
audience – that hunting mosquitoes is a grueling task. He says, “The mosquito’s a clever little bastard. You can track him for days until you really get to know him like a friend. He knows you’re there, and you know he’s there. It’s a game of wits. You hate him, then you respect him, then you kill him.” Watching Chapman and Idle each crawl towards bushes with large guns generates visual humor and incongruity. As the sketch continues, the burlesque, or de-familiarization between actions and setting, nature continues throughout:

**Narrator:** Now more than ever, they must rely on the skills they have learnt from a lifetime’s hunting. Hank gauges the wind. Roy examines the mosquito’s spoor. Then… *(Ray fires a bazooka. Hank fires off a machine gun. A series of almighty explosions in the small patch of field. The gunfire stops and the smoke begins to clear.)* It’s a success. The mosquito now is dead. *(Hank and Roy approach the scorched and blackened patch in the field.)* But Roy must make sure. *(Roy points machine gun at head of mosquito and fires off another few rounds.)*

**Roy:** There’s nothing more dangerous than a wounded mosquito.

**Narrator:** But the hunt is not over. With well practiced skill Hank skins the mosquito. *(Hank produces an enormous curved knife and begins to start skinning the tiny mosquito.)* The wings of a fully grown male mosquito can in fact fetch anything up to point eight of a penny on the open market.

The size of the weapons – both the guns and the knife, and later the missiles – does not logically match the size of the game that Roy and Hank are hunting. In “Mosquito Hunters,” the brothers view bugs as such a formidable foe that they do not regard their artillery as unbalanced. Idle’s character says, “A lot of people have asked us why we don’t use fly spray. Well, where’s the sport in that?” As the narrator explains, “For Roy, sport is everything. Ever since he lost his left arm battling with an ant, Roy has risked his life in the pursuit of tiny creatures.” Throughout the sketch, none of the three voices allude to the absurdity of the hunting of “inoffensive, tiny insects;” instead Monty Python is
relying on the audience to have enough worldly knowledge to know that hunting such insects is illogical and to laugh.

“Mosquito Hunters” not only unsettles expectations through content, but also by concluding as it does. The sketch concludes with the image of Chapman and Idle standing on a tank while heroic music plays. The music continues to grow; as it reaches a climax, the music builds into nothing. Seamlessly, the camera cuts to the “Poofy Judges” (see chapter two, p. 49) sketch to reveal Palin and Idle walking down a long hallway in full judge robes and wigs. “Mosquito Hunters” does not have a fitting ending. Rather, the sketch just stops and moves on without comment.

Monty Python used generic television conventions in the “Poofy Judge” sketch. However, they did not do so in order to make the audience comfortable. Like how they used canned applause “to call attention to its artificial character” (Landy, 2005, p. 43), “Poofy Judges” uses a blackout so that the audience might question the legitimacy of this generic convention. While the style of presentation for the sketch adapted clichés, the dialogue continues Monty Python’s form of satirizing authority by having judges act very camp in spite of the fact that they were dressed in the traditional style of the court with long robes and white wigs. Immediately prior to the fade out, Idle’s character pulls away his robe to reveal that underneath his traditional attire he was wearing a gold sequined outfit. The fade out unsettles the audience because it follows Palin saying, “Oh, aye,” rather than a joke or a gag.

When “Archaeology Today” fades into the next sketch, Idle and Chapman are pepperpots – the term used to describe the female characters that the Pythons played – and prepared to make statements that unsettle audience expectations. Some statements are contradictory such as:

Mrs. Entity (Idle): How are you then?

Mrs. Thing (Chapman): Oh, I’ve had a morning.

Mrs. Entity: Busy?
Mrs. Thing: Busy – huh! I got up at five o’clock, I made myself a cup of tea, I looked out the window. Well, by then I was so worn out I had to come and have a sit-down. I’ve been here for seven hours.

Mrs. Entity: You must be exhausted!

Logically, none of the activities Chapman’s character describes are particularly trying. Rather, sitting and having a cup of tea while looking out the window is in fact relaxing compared to all the possibilities of city life. The sketch continues with further mundane comments:

Mrs. Entity: It’ll be worse when we join the Common Market.

Mrs. Thing: That nice Mr. Heath would never allow that.

Mrs. Entity: It’s funny he never married.

Mrs. Thing: He’s a bachelor.

Mrs. Entity: Oooh! That would explain it. Oh dear me, this chatting away wears me out.

Mrs. Thing: Yes. I bet Mrs. Reginald Maudling doesn’t have to put up with all this drudgery, getting up at five in the morning, making a cup of tea, looking out the window, chatting away.

Mrs. Entity: No! It’d all be done for her.

Mrs. Thing: Yes, she’d have the whole day free for playing snooker.

Aside from the comment regarding a politician’s wife having people to do the “exhausting” activities for her, “Mrs. Thing and Mrs. Entity” in large part serves as a long link to the next sketch.

The two speak of the wives of other famous figures – not just British celebrities – talking about how difficult it was in the old days when housewives had to complete tasks such as “[catching] partridges with her bare hands.” Eventually, they bring up “Mrs. Beethoven,” and set up for a flashback:

Mrs. Thing: Mrs. Beethoven used to have to get up at midnight to spur on the mynah bird.

Mrs. Entity: Lazy creatures, mynah birds…
**Mrs. Thing:** Yes. When Beethoven went deaf the mynah bird just used to mime.

Television audiences are familiar with the techniques used to indicate a flashback: the picture grows fuzzy and dreamy music begins to play. Yet, in other programs, the characters themselves do not acknowledge this convention. However, they do in “Archaeology Today.” As the two pepperpots grow fuzzy, Idle’s character is bewildered and questions what is going on. Chapman’s character promptly responds, “It’s all right. It’s only a flashback.” The audience is aware of these television conventions, but they do not expect the characters to share the same awareness, or even to notice when clichéd camera techniques are used in a program. Yet, in *Flying Circus* the characters call attention to this editing device.

Linking directly from the mundane conversation from “Mrs. Thing and Mrs. Entity,” the establishing shot of Cleese as Beethoven sitting at a piano. The mynah bird can be seen off to the side where he is opening and closing his beak without making a sound. In response, Cleese grows agitated and yells, “You don’t fool me, you stupid mynah bird. I’m not deaf yet.” In *Flying Circus* reality was altered. In reality, a person would not know that in the future they might lose their hearing; however, in the world of Monty Python, where reality was altered for the sake of comedy, Beethoven is privy to such knowledge.

The pepperpots in “Mrs. Thing and Mrs. Entity” were focused on the wives of famous figures as the true hard workers. While the role of Beethoven allows Cleese to fulfill his oft-played persona of – as Idle explained – “the cruel, heartless bastard” (*Life of Python*, 1999) as he sat at the piano trying to remember the notes in the opening to “Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony,” Mrs. Beethoven hurried around the room shrieking, vacuuming, and generally distracting – and irritating – her husband:

**Mrs. Beethoven (Chapman):** Ludwig!

**Beethoven:** What?

**Mrs. Beethoven:** Have you seen the sugar bowl?
Beethoven: No, I haven’t seen the bloody sugar bowl.

Mrs. Beethoven: You know…the sugar bowl.

Beethoven: Sod the sugar bowl…I’m trying to finish this stinking tune! It’s driving me spare…so shut up! (She leaves; he goes into opening bars of ‘Washington Post March.’) No, no, no, no, no.

Mrs. Beethoven: Ludwig, have you seen the jam spoon?

Beethoven: Stuff the jam spoon!

Mrs. Beethoven: It was in the sugar bowl.

Beethoven: Look, get out, you old rat-bag. Buzz off and shut up.

In “Archaeology Today,” historical figures appeared through a Monty Python lens. In other words, the interaction between Beethoven and Mrs. Beethoven is not concerned with history’s portrayal of Beethoven as a famed musical talent. Rather, while Cleese has a difficult time trying to remember the note he selected for his symphony, Chapman as his wife nags him about mundane goings-on that often are not associated with the life of Beethoven.

One generic convention that Monty Python violated early on was having dialogue transcend the boundaries of a sketch. In this sketch, Beethoven, Shakespeare, and Michelangelo can communicate with one another even though the three historical figures did not exist during the same time period. When faced with his wife yelling about peanut butter – an example of absurdity – Beethoven bemoans, “Shakespeare never had this trouble.” Although Shakespeare had died nearly one-hundred-and-fifty years prior to the birth of Beethoven, in the surreal, fantastic world of Flying Circus, Shakespeare could not only hear the moans of Beethoven, but respond:

Shakespeare washing up at a sink (present day).


Cut back to Beethoven.
Beethoven: You’re right! Oh, incidentally, why not call him Hamlet?

Cut back to Shakespeare.

Shakespeare: Hamlet! I like. Much better than David. (He shouts through the open window next to the sink.) Michelangelo! You can use David. I won’t sue.

Cut to Michelangelo’s studio. Michelangelo is in the middle of feeding and looking after at least six screaming little babies. His statue of David is in the foreground.

Michelangelo (Jones): Thanks, but I’ve had a better idea.

Camera pans down to show engraved on plinth beneath statue the words ‘Michelangelo’s fifth symphony.’

The Flying Circus audience needed to be familiar with artistic culture in order to understand the humor in this sketch. Not only did they need to recognize the three works of art, but also an educated audience would know that William Shakespeare was out of place standing in front of a sink in a modern setting.

The members of Monty Python enjoyed altering history to de-familiarize the audience. They trusted the university-educated students who were among the initial cult audience (Neale, 2001b) to have prior knowledge about the universal icons. Eventually the sketch links back to Beethoven and Mrs. Beethoven who are visited by Colin Mozart, a rat-catcher. When Colin Mozart – played by Palin – approaches the Beethoven’s door, the other names on the building’s notice board are those of Mr. and Mrs. Emmanuel Kant and Mr. Dickie Wagner. The college educated audience will be in on this joke. When Mrs. Beethoven lets Colin Mozart in, “13.4 seconds” after he rang the bell – according to a caption – the audience once again sees Cleese as Beethoven. Now Cleese’s character is annoyed because rats have invaded his piano. He shouts, “Get out of the bloody piano you stupid furry bucktoothed gits! Get out!” Next, “Archaeology Today” links back to earlier sketches. Like the
“Mosquito Hunters” sketch, Colin Mozart has come armed with a machine gun in order to kill the rats that are living in Beethoven’s piano.

As with other Flying Circus sketches, “Colin Mozart” does not end with a punch-line or any other clichéd ending. Instead, Beethoven is so bothered by the sound of Colin Mozart firing off his machine gun at his piano – an action that results in Beethoven being left with only the piano keys – that he yells “Shut up,” and the episode uses the fuzzy picture technique to transition back to the older women – Chapman and Idle – who are sitting on a bench saying, “Beethoven was rather glad when he went deaf.” Nothing more is heard from these two characters as “Archaeology Today” ends with the returns of the poofy judges. However, in order to violate generic expectations, the two judges do not begin a sketch at the beginning. Instead, the format of the sketch assumes that the two characters had been speaking throughout the sketches that were interlaced since their last appearance. Like other Flying Circus sketches, no one line can be identified as the joke or the punch-line. The ending credits roll across the screen; the ending theme music can be heard quietly while the judges continue speaking:

**Second Judge (Palin):** Yes. She’s so strict. She was on at me for giving dolly sentences, you know, specifically in that arson case.

**First Judge (Idle):** What was the verdict?

**Second Judge:** They preferred the brown wig.

**First Judge:** Mm. I love the Scottish Assizes. I know what they mean by a really well-hung jury.

**Second Judge:** Ooh! Get back in the witness box, you’re too sharp to live!

**First Judge:** I’ll smack your little botty!

**Second Judge:** Ooh! And again.
The judges continue their very camp rapport with one another. The humor in this scenario is in Monty Python’s complete disregard for the credits as an important part of a television show. This is a reflection of the group’s belief that Monty Python should be a group and not one individual getting more recognition than the others (Morgan, 1999). The members of Monty Python used the episode “Archaeology Today” to illustrate that the characters were not interested in what rolling credits meant to a television show, and that these credits could be ignored and superimposed over dialogue.

*How to Recognise Different Parts of the Body: “Is your name not Bruce, then?”*

Some of the episode titles (e.g., “Owl-Stretching Time,” “Whither Canada,” and “The Naked Ant”) are not connected to the content of the program, and thus not always understood or known, even by fans of the show. Other episodes (e.g., “Spam” and “The All-England Summarize Proust Competition”) are titled after one of the sketches that appear in the program. For “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body,” – originally broadcast in the UK on November 24, 1970 – the title not only links to the episode, but the opening credits were changed so that the banner the little chicken man drags across the screen read, “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” instead of “Monty Python’s Flying Circus.” When the oversized foot comes down to crush the chicken man, as has been done in all opening animations prior, a small arrow points to the foot and a voice-over – provided by Cleese – says, “Number one: the foot.” Throughout the episode, Cleese’s voice and the little arrow provide the links and transitions from sketch-to-sketch.

In “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body,” the short links consisting of arrows identifying body parts are written with the same attention to humor that this is paid to writing longer sketches. In other words, although comprised only a superimposed white arrow and Cleese’s voice, in the style of an announcer or a narrator, the links are humorous. In this section, I will include all the body parts needing to be recognized from “Number one: the foot” to “Number thirty-one: the end” amongst my analysis and discussion of micro-elements.
After using the opening animation to establish the style – little white arrow and Cleese’s voice – that Monty Python would be using to recognize parts of the body, camera cuts reminiscent of slide shows that grammar schools used to get pupils to indentify landmarks and works of art allow the audience – who are serving as students in this metaphor – to recognize body parts. From the foot, the next image is the top half of Venus de Milo with an arrow pointing to the shoulder, the lesson continues:

**Voice Over:** Number two: the shoulder.

*Cut to picture of a foot cut off at the ankle. Cigarettes are packed in the top. Superimposed arrow.*

**Voice Over:** Number three: the other foot.

*Cut to profile picture of a strange person (provided by Terry Gilliam). Superimposed arrow pointing to the bridge of the nose.*

**Voice Over:** Number four: the bridge of the nose.

*Cut to picture, full length, of man wearing polka dotted Bermuda shorts. Arrow superimposed to shorts.*

**Voice Over:** Number five: the naughty bits.

*Cut to picture of a crooked elbow. Superimposed arrow pointing just above the elbow.*

**Voice Over:** Number six: just above the elbow.

*Cut to closer picture of a different person in identical Bermuda shorts. Superimposed arrow pointing to top of groin.*

**Voice Over:** Number seven: two inches to the right of a very naughty bit indeed.

*Cut to close-up of a real knee (later revealed to be the knee belonging to Eric Idle). Arrow superimposed pointing to the knee.*

**Voice Over:** Number eight: the knee cap.
By going beyond the most basic parts of the body, *Flying Circus* has mocked the use of slides to educate the public. Monty Python has also mixed in real-life images along with the photograph in order to transition into the “Bruces” sketch by zooming out to reveal Eric Idle (as First Bruce) in full Australian outback gear.

“Bruces” has found a way to make the educated seem mindless and ignorant: by giving them Australian accents. Prior to 1907 when the British colonies in Australia were able to “[self-govern] as a Dominion” (Clarke, 2004, p. 16), Australia was under imperialistic British rule. Although the members of Monty Python mercilessly mock Australians in the “Bruces” sketch, the Bruces are educated and even instructors in a college philosophy department. Among the courses they teach are logical positivism and political science (they are even permitted to teach British politics, so long as they make it clear that all of the British were wrong).

The Bruces are reflexive of British attitudes about Australians. Their use of crass language makes them seem uneducated:

**Third Bruce (Palin):** Blimey s’hot in here, Bruce.

**First Bruce (Idle):** S’hot enough to boil a monkey’s bum.

**Second Bruce (Chapman):** That’s a strange expression, Bruce.

**First Bruce:** Well Bruce, I heard the prime minister use it. S’hot enough to boil a monkey’s bum in ‘ere your Majesty, he said, and she smiled quietly to herself.

**Third Bruce:** She’s a good sheila, Bruce, and not at all stuck up.

In Britain, no person would refer to the Queen of Britain as a “sheila” or any other familiar terms. While the British monarchy no longer has the power and authority they enjoyed during the years of the British Empire, the institution still exists.

The “Bruces” sketch continues with the Bruces appearing even stranger when juxtaposed against Michael Baldwin, played by Jones. Jones never saw himself as a very funny person, once
saying, “It’s all a bit defensive, I think, doing things to make people laugh” (as cited in Wilmut, 1980, p. 220). In “Bruces” when the character enters next to yet another outback-gear-wearing Bruce, the Bruces appear to be all the more outrageous and underdressed because in a nice suit, Jones’ character looks very English (although Jones himself was Welsh) and looks more like a professor should look:

**Fourth Bruce (Cleese):** Goodday Bruce, Hello Bruce, how are you, Bruce? Gentlemen, I’d like to introduce a chap from pommie land…who’ll be joining us this year here in the Philosophy Department of the University of Woolamaloo.

**All:** Goodday.

**Fourth Bruce:** Michael Baldwin – this is Bruce. Michael Baldwin – this is Bruce. Michael Baldwin – this is Bruce.

**First Bruce:** Is your name not Bruce, then?

**Michael:** No, it’s Michael.

**Second Bruce:** That’s going to cause a little confusion.

**Third Bruce:** Yeah. Mind if we call you Bruce, just to keep it clear?

*Flying Circus* featured outrageous humor. For the audience, having different names for each person is a way to “keep it clear,” and a room full of Bruces is what gets “a little [confusing].” “Bruces” continues to defy and violate expectations of the norm. For example, the faculty meeting that follows Palin’s Bruce requesting a less confusion name is unlike any other professional meeting:

**Fourth Bruce:** Before we start [the meeting] though, I’ll ask the padre for a prayer.

First Bruce snaps a plastic dog-collar round his neck. They all lower their heads.

**First Bruce:** O Lord we beseech thee, have mercy on our faculty, Amen.

**All:** Amen.

**Fourth Bruce:** Crack the tubes, right.

Third Bruce starts opening beer cans.
Fourth Bruce: Er, Bruce, I now call upon you to welcome Mr. Baldwin to the Philosophy Department.

Second Bruce: I’d like to welcome the pommie bastard to God’s own earth and I’d like to remind him that we don’t like stuck-up sticky-beaks here.

The term “pommie” is an Australian disparaging term for a British person. The other Bruces all find Chapman’s welcome acceptable. As the sketch continues, they respond positively to his endearing welcome:

All: Hear, hear. Well spoken, Bruce.

Fourth Bruce: Now, Bruce teaches classical philosophy, Bruce teaches Hegelian philosophy, and Bruce here teaches logical positivism and is also in charge of the sheep-dip. […] New Bruce will be teaching political science – Machiavelli, Bentham, Locke, Hobbes, Sutcliffe, Bradman, Lindwall, Miller, Hasset, and Benaud. […] In addition, as he’s going to be teaching politics I’ve told him he’s welcome to teach any of the great socialist thinkers, provided he makes it clear that they were wrong.

They all stand up.

All: Australia, Australia, Australia, Australia, we love you. Amen.

They sit down.

Fourth Bruce: Any questions?

Second Bruce: New Bruce – are you a poofthah?

Fourth Bruce: Are you a poofthah?

Michael: No.

Fourth Bruce: No right, well gentlemen, I’ll just remind you of the faculty rules. Rule one – no poofthahs. Rule two – no member of the faculty is to maltreat the Abbos in any way whatsoever, if there’s anyone watching. Rule three – no poofthahs. Rule four – I don’t want to

**First Bruce:** That here’s the wattle – the emblem of our land. You stick it in a bottle or hold it in yer hand.

**All:** Amen.

In *Flying Circus*, the members of Monty Python enjoyed taking a situation “with a strong and recognizable style of presentation and then empty the content out of it and replace it with something ludicrous” (Wilmut, 1980, p. 198). At no other meeting does beer and outback-gear play such a significant role. In addition, half the rules for respectable faculty behavior at the University state that no poofthas – a slang term for a homosexual man – are permitted.

The “Bruces” sketch concludes with the Bruces being brought an enormous tray filled with large steaks for “elevenses.” Palin’s character exclaims happily, “This should tide us over ‘til lunchtime.” The line is one final use of superiority humor – laughing at others for being inferior – in the “Bruces” sketch by making fun of Australian’s appetites before using body parts once again to transition:

**First Bruce:** What’s that? *(Points.)*

*Cut to dramatic close-up of Fourth Bruce’s ear. Hold close-up. The superimposed arrow points to the ear.*

**Voice Over (John Cleese):** Number nine: the ear.

*Cut to a picture of a big toe. Superimposed arrow.*

**Voice Over:** Number ten: the big toe.

*Cut to picture of another man in Bermuda shorts. Superimposed arrow pointing to shorts.*

**Voice Over:** Number eleven: more naughty bits.
This is not only a line that recalls earlier in “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body,” but it also serves as a launching point for Python humor to become all the more absurd:

Cut to a full length shot of lady in Bermuda shorts and Bermuda bra. Superimposed arrow on each side of her body. One points to the bra, one to the Bermuda shorts.

Voice Over: Number twelve: the naughty bits of a lady.

Cut to picture of a horse wearing Bermuda shorts. Superimposed arrow.

Voice Over: Number thirteen: the naughty bits of a horse.

Cut to picture of an ant. In very corner of a blank area. It is very tiny. Superimposed enormous arrow.

Voice Over: Number fourteen: the naughty bits of an ant.

Cut to picture of Reginald Maudling with Bermuda shorts, put on by Terry Gilliam, over his dark suit. Superimpose arrow pointing to shorts.

Voice Over: Number fifteen: the naughty bits of Reginald Maudling.

Just when the audience might suspect a pattern amongst these links after the “naughty bits” of Robert Maudling, a conservative British politician, the next body part breaks the pattern and instead transitions into the “Man Who Contradicts Everyone” sketch:

Cut to close up of false hand sticking out of a sleeve. Superimposed arrow.

Voice Over: Number sixteen: the hand.

Pull back to reveal that the hand appears to belong to a standard interviewer in two shot. Chair set up with standard interviewee. The interviewer suddenly pulls the hand off, revealing that he has a hook. He throws the hand away and starts the interview.

The last action does not even take a second on film, and therefore the audience can possibly miss it, or at least not take great notice because other things are going on. By tossing away the fake hand, Palin as the interviewer is noting the importance Flying Circus gave to transitions. Monty Python did not
use blackouts at the end of sketches, as expected with the sketch comedy genre. However, in order to
prevent the audience – even those audience members who were part of the cult following – from
getting too comfortable and being able to predict the show, the interviewer jars the audience by
removing the false hand and tossing it away without comment.

Palin once said that he and Jones had tried to use confrontation in their sketches, but “no
one’s as good at abuse as John is – except Graham – as a partnership they’re most intimidating” (as
where the sketch consists of characters facing one another and using verbal sparring. In this short
sketch, Jones, as Mr. Polevaulter contradicts everything Palin says. “The Man Who Contradicts
Everyone” is also an example of the group’s habit of not always liking the endings of a sketch in the
writing process, and thus deciding as writers to stop it abruptly (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut,
2009). This abrupt shift is seen here as an example of denying the audience a conclusion of a sketch:

**Interviewer:** 1952?

**Polevaulter:** 1947.

**Interviewer:** Twenty-three years ago.

**Polevaulter:** No.

_Cut to announcer at desk in farmyard. He is fondly holding a small pig._

**Announcer (Cleese):** And so on and so on and so on. And now—

_Cut to picture of the Pope. Slight pause, so we think it might be something to do with the
Pope. An arrow suddenly comes in above him pointing at his head._

**Voice Over (Cleese):** Number seventeen: the top of the head.

The members of Monty Python were in a hurry to return to the manner of links they had selected for
“How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body.”
As Monty Python members had done with the variations of naughty bits in the last transition segment, body parts began to branch out and turn bizarre – or not parts of the human body at all:

*Cut to picture of an indeterminate bit of flesh with a feather sticking out. Superimposed arrow pointing to feather.*

**Voice Over:** Number eighteen: …the feather, rare.

*Cut to profile of Raymond Luxury Yacht [a character who was initially introduced in the nineteenth episode of Flying Circus, “It’s a Living”] from next sketch who has an enormous fake polystyrene nose. Superimposed arrow pointing at nose.*

**Voice Over:** Number nineteen: the nose.

When Chapman lost his battle to cancer in 1989, Cleese was selected to give one of the eulogies at the memorial service. In the eulogy – one that was as unconventional as *Flying Circus* itself – Cleese expressed that Chapman was the greatest personification of what Monty Python was. Cleese said, “Gray, more than anyone I knew, embodied and symbolized all that was most offensive and juvenile in Monty Python. And his delight in shocking people led him on to greater and greater feats. […] It is magnificent, isn’t it? You see, the thing about shock is not that it upsets some people, I think that it gives others a momentary joy of liberation” (*Life of Python*, 1999). The character, Raymond Luxury Yacht, who appears twice in the second season in a ridiculous nose yelling at others for mispronouncing his name, is an example of this juvenile humor that Chapman – who Gilliam described as “The Splunge!” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 110) – exhibited.

For the *Flying Circus* audience who had been watching the series in broadcast order, they had already seen Raymond Luxury Yacht in a sketch in a previous episode. Therefore, “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” does not spend a good deal of time setting up the “Cosmetic Surgery” sketch by focusing on the nose because the size of the nose is not a shock to the faithful audience, who had seen it a few weeks prior. Instead, following the profile short of Raymond Luxury Yacht, “How to
Recognize Different Parts of the Body” focuses on the specialist by filming his name plate – and all the subsequent degrees that are outrageous in sheer number and cause the name plate to continue off the desk and circle around the room:

_We start to track along the name plate on which is written “Professor Sir Adrian Furrows F.R.S., F.R.C.S., F.R.C., F.R.C.P., M.D.M.S. (Oxon), M.A., Ph.D., M.Sc. (Cantab), Ph.D. (Syd), F.R.G.S., F.R.C.O.G., F.F.A.R.C.S., M.S. (Birm), M.S. (Liv), (Phil), D.Litt (Phil), D.Litt (Ottawa), D.Litt (All other places in Canada except Medicine Hat), B.Sc:9 Brussels Liège, Antwerp, Asse (and Cromer).”_

Python “represents a social critique and is not narrowly concerned with politics or politicians” (Wagg, 1992, p. 269). _Flying Circus_ satirizes what Monty Python knows. With the exception of Terry Gilliam and Chapman’s very brief medical career, “none of ‘the Pythons’ has seen much of the world outside home, school, elite university and comedy writing” (Wagg, 1992, p. 269). The sketches in _Flying Circus_ often target middle class Britons where “elite, high culture marries, or collides, with banal mass culture” (Wagg, 1992, p. 271). In this example, the specialist’s numerous degrees that need to be continued around the circumference of the room, reflect the Python view of being against any single person, authority, or organization that pretends to know best. Instead of all the degrees being presented as an impressive feat, the fact that the name plate needs to wrap around the room begs the question, "Who needs all these?"

Upon Raymond Luxury Yacht’s entrance, the sketch immediately switches from satire to a more absurd humor. Initially, the sketch was satirical of elites who have acquired so many academic degrees that their moniker becomes ludicrously long; however, the sight of Chapman as Raymond Luxury Yacht makes up the visual humor and absurdity because of the psychological response of laughter to the image of his nose. In one aspect, it is superiority humor because the audience is laughing at the size of his fake nose. In another aspect, knowing that it is a fake nose and remembering
how a character had reacted to Raymond Luxury Yacht in a previous episode provides incongruity. In “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body,” Monty Python wanted to explore how a different character would react to the “fake-hootered” chap:

Specialist (Cleese): Ah! Mr. Luxury Yacht. Do sit down, please.

Raymond Luxury Yacht: Ah, no, no. My name is spelt ‘Luxury Yacht’ but it’s pronounced ‘Throatwobbler Mangrove.’

Specialist: Well, do sit down then Mr. Throatwobbler Mangrove.

Raymond Luxury Yacht: Thank you.

At this point, even avid Flying Circus fans are caught unaware by the content of “How to Recognize Different Types of the Body.” The last time a character had encountered Raymond Luxury Yacht and had been instructed on the pronunciation, the character – played by Palin in “It’s a Living” (1970) – had said, “You’re a very silly man, and I’m not going to interview you” (Episode 19, “It’s a Living,” 1970). In “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body,” the specialist not only accepted the ridiculous name, but he also allowed Raymond Luxury Yacht to carry on:

Specialist: Now, what seems to be the trouble?

Raymond Luxury Yacht: Um, I’d like you to perform some plastic surgery on me.

Specialist: I see. And what particular feature of your anatomy is causing you distress?

Raymond Luxury Yacht: Well, for a long time now, in fact, even when I was a child…I…you know, whenever I left home to…catch a bus, or…to catch a train…and even my tennis has suffered actually—

Specialist: Yes. To be absolutely blunt you’re worried about your enormous hooter. […] Yes, and you want me to hack a bit off.

Raymond Luxury Yacht: Please.

Specialist: Fine. It is a startler, isn’t it? Er, do you mind if I…er…
Raymond Luxury Yacht: What?

Specialist: Oh, no nothing, then, well I’ll just examine your nose. *(He does so; as he examines it the nose comes off in his hand.)* Mr. Luxury Yacht, this nose of yours it false. It’s made of polystyrene, and your own hooter’s a beaut. No pruning necessary.

Raymond Luxury Yacht: I’d still like the operation.

Specialist: Well, you’ve had the operation, you strange person.

Raymond Luxury Yacht: Please do an operation.

Specialist: Well, all right, all right, but only…if you come on a camping holiday with me.

Raymond Luxury Yacht *(to camera with huge smile)*: He asked me! He asked me!

_Cut to lyrical film of Raymond Luxury Yacht and the specialist, frolicking in countryside in slow motion._

_Cut to interviewer*(the one with the hook)*at desk.

Interviewer: Next week we’ll be showing you how to pick up an architect, how to pull a prime minister, and how to have fun with a wholesale poulterer.

The numerous “how-tos” reference the name of the episode, “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body.” The interviewer appears for a second time to establish Monty Python’s use of repetition by once again having characters appear more than once in a thirty-minute episode.

_Flying Circus_ often featured Cleese as an announcer, who sat at a desk – always outside in grass fields, by a lake, on the sidewalk, anywhere that was not a normal place to see a desk – and fueled transitions with his comment, “And now for something completely different.” However, occasionally, the transitional “And/But now…” phrase would be said by other performers, as is the case here. As the interviewer, Palin transitions to a sketch that mocks the British Army by parodying army songs. Palin states, “But now the men of the Derbyshire Light Infantry entertain us with a precision display of bad temper.”
Following the exaggerated and camp-y army songs and the animation of the dancing generals (as described in chapter two, pp. 49-50), “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” transitions to the next sketch by using Gilliam’s animations. Throughout the series animations were often used as links; at times these transitions were short, other times Gilliam would expand the animation, and thus illustrate his ability to supplement the surreal, dream-like nature of Flying Circus. The animation flowed like a stream-of-consciousness. While the three generals danced, a second animated man – in a completely different location – says, “I can’t take it anymore.” The generals all continue dancing. Gilliam’s animation would often “create the fantastic, nonsensical, and surreal world that characterized the comic world of the Pythons” (Landy, 2005, p. 13). Therefore, pained by the sound of the “Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy,” the animated man shoots himself in the head. As a result, one of his eyeballs falls out and plummets towards the earth where it turns into a bus-stop sign upon impact for the “Killer Cars” cartoon.

The animation not only exhibits Gilliam’s style of interlacing and connecting absurd ideas to create a narrative through his animation segments of Flying Circus, but it also reinforced Monty Python’s ever-present theme of the bizarre and weird in their comedy. “Killer Cars” has cars jumping out from behind trees to squash pedestrians and cats that eat everything from these dangerous cars to large buildings while walking around on their two back legs. For those who are not fans of Flying Circus, Gilliam’s animations might be unnerving and distracting; people might regard them as taking away from the show. However, the animations are partly responsible for the way that Flying Circus violated generic expectations. The animations were bizarre, yet they were an important part of each episode. In “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” Gilliam’s animation is about the link the dancing soldiers to stock film of battleships prior to showing Cleese as the announcer, sitting on a beach behind his desk.
“How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” places characters in locations that make the content of the episode burlesque (defined in chapter one, p. 7). A seaside desk is only the first example in the “Batley Townswomen’s Guild Presents the First Heart Transplant” sketch:

**Announcer:** And here is the result of the ‘Where to put Edward Heath’s statue’ Competition.
The winner was a Mr. Ivy North who wins ten guineas and a visit to the Sailors Quarters.
*Cut to quick clip of the Battle of Pearl Harbor from show eleven, first series. Beginning with Eric’s blowing the whistle and the two sides rushing at each other. Cut back to announcer.*

**Announcer:** That was last year’s re-enactment of the Battle of Pearl Harbor performed by the Batley Townswomen’s Guild. It was produced by Mrs. Rita Fairbanks.
*CUT to Rita Fairbanks on the beach.*

**Rita (Idle):** Hello again.

**Commentator (Palin) (off-screen):** And what are you ladies going to do for us this year?

**Rita:** Well, this year we decided to re-enact something with a more modern flavor. We had considered a version of Michael Stewart’s speech on Nigeria and there were several votes on the Committee for a staging of Herr Willi Brandt’s visit to East Germany, but we settled instead for a dramatization of the first heart transplant. Incidentally my sister Madge will be playing the plucky little springbok pioneer Christian Barnard.

**Commentator (off-screen):** Well, off we go, then with the Batley Townswomen’s Guild re-enactment of the first heart transplant.

The episode “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” replays a prior sketch of the members of Monty Python in drag all running at and tackling one another. This was the method that group violence was often presented as in *Flying Circus*. On the beach, the same characters are ready to perform the first heart transplant. However, to the physiological delight of the audience, the Batley Townswomen charge at each other in an identical manner to their depiction of the attack on Pearl
Harbor. For the members Monty Python, the first heart transplant could be performed as screeching
townswomen running at one another until they end up in the sea rolling about and hitting one another
with handbags.

The members of Monty Python continue to use their setting – the sea – to illustrate
incongruity. Initially, the announcer’s desk was on the edge of the shore, yet when Cleese is shown
again, he and his desk has been moved deeper into the sea so that he is surrounded by water. The
sketch continues with more bizarre performances, all taking place underwater. Cleese, as the
announcer, says, “That is not the only open-air production here that has used the sea. Theatrical
managers in this area have not been slow to appreciate the sea’s tremendous dramatic value. And
somewhere, out in this bay, is the first underwater production of Measure for Measure.” As
incongruent as performing Shakespeare underwater is, it is even funnier to see the absurd image of an
open sea with muffled blank verse dubbed on. In one moment, Jones and Palin – both as
Shakespearian character actors – break to the surface to take a deep breath before they go under again.
Meanwhile, three other characters in Shakespeare dress are seated in a row boat awaiting their cue.
The absurdity builds when the audience is met with Cleese – and his desk – waist-deep in the sea
explaining, “Further out to sea Hello Dolly is also doing good business.” Upon hearing muffled
watery singing, the bizarre escalades; in addition to musicals and Shakespeare, formula two car races
are also taking place “over there on the oyster beds.”

In connection to the underwater car races, a sign reads “pit stop.” This allows Gilliam to
interlace a short animation. In addition, Gilliam connected a racing pit stop to an arm pit by illustrating
a race car driving up the image of a nude woman, right past the “pit stop” sign. The camera stills on
the animated woman’s arm pit, and once again a superimposed white arrow appears and points to the
armpit. “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” now continues the linking device it began at
the beginning of the episode:


**Voice Over (John Cleese):** Number twenty: the armpits.

_Cut to picture of a person. Superimposed white arrow points to the neck._

**Voice Over:** Number twenty-one: the bottom two-thirds of the nape of the neck.

The next image is of a radio. Like the feather, a radio is not a part of the body. Even more unexpected is when Cleese says, “Number twenty-two: the nipple.” The audience cannot possibly understand this under the superimposed white arrow points at the tuning dial. When the camera zooms out to reveal Cleese and Chapman as two pepperpots sitting on a couch listening to the radio, “Number twenty-two: the nipple” is a link to the sketch.

The sketch does not only transition by pointing to a radio that two characters happen to be listening to. In addition, Cleese’s voice is now heard over the radio as he says, “…And that concludes this week’s episode of ‘How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body,’ adapted for radio by Ann Haydon-Jones and her husband, Pip. And now, we present the first episode of a new radio drama series, ‘The Death of Mary Queen of Scots.’ Part one, the beginning.” Previously, in the episode, Cleese’s voice was acting as narrator, and therefore characters could not hear him, however as a radio announcer, characters could now hear him say, “Number twenty-two: the nipple.” In *Flying Circus* humor was often generated through de-familiarization; the audience would believe one thing, and then quickly their beliefs were violated.

As the two pepperpots, Cleese and Chapman listen to the opening theme music – the same music that BBC Radio used for the character Paul Temple in the radio “whodunit” dramas from 1938-1960 – while listening to “The Death of Mary Queen of Scots.” Mary Stewart was executed for treason in 1587, the fictional radio drama plays a series of noises that indicate Mary is getting attacked by numerous means, including thumps, drilling, and shooting. All the while, Chapman and Cleese each sit on the couch calmly facing the radio. This lasts for several seconds until the radio announcer informs the listeners of the conclusion in a manner that is similar to his previous announcement. The
radio announcer says, “‘The Death of Mary Queen of Scots,’ adapted for the radio by Bernard Hollywood and Brian London. And now, Radio 4 will explode.” Instead of announcing another radio show for the two women to listen to, the members of Monty Python violate audience expectations by having the radio explode.

Without a radio, the pepperpots are left with having to find another source of entertainment in the sitting room. Chapman’s character says, “We’ll have to watch the telly [television] then.” What follows is some of Flying Circus’ greatest portrayal of absurdity as the two pepperpots debate the penguin that has appeared atop their television set without any prior knowledge on the part of either Chapman’s or Cleese’s characters:

First Pepperpot (Chapman): Well, what’s on the television then?

Second Pepperpot (Cleese): Looks like a penguin.

*On the television set there is indeed a penguin. It sits contentedly looking at them in a stuffed sort of way. There is nothing on the screen.*

First Pepperpot: No, no, no, I didn’t mean what’s on the television set, I meant what programme?

While the two are waiting for the television picture to show up on their small television, they discuss the origins of the penguin:

Second Pepperpot: It’s funny that penguin being there innit? What’s it doing there?

First Pepperpot: Standing.

Second Pepperpot: I can see that.

First Pepperpot: If it lays an egg, it will fall down the back of the television set.

Second Pepperpot: We’ll have to watch that. Unless it’s a male.

First Pepperpot: Ooh, I never thought of that.

Second Pepperpot: Yes, looks fairly butch.
First Pepperpot: Perhaps it comes from next door.

Second Pepperpot: Penguins don’t come from next door, they come from the Antarctic.

First Pepperpot: Burma.

Burma was part of British India until it achieved independence in 1937. However, the audience does not learn that from the sketch. Instead, the line – written by Chapman – is an example of his ability to throw in off-the-wall ideas to the script he wrote with Cleese. While some of Chapman’s random ideas – such as “Norwegian Blue” from “Full Frontal Nudity” – elevated the sketch by adding “an entirely new element that no one else would ever consider” (Graham Chapman’s Personal Best, 2005), some of his ideas – saying “Burma” in the middle of a sketch for instance – were only funny because of how unexpected and random they were. The sketch continues with a brief mention of Chapman shouting “Burma,” and then an involved discussion of the mysterious penguin:

Second Pepperpot: Why did you say Burma?

First Pepperpot: I panicked.

Second Pepperpot: Oh. Perhaps it’s from the zoo.

First Pepperpot: Which zoo?

Second Pepperpot: How should I know which zoo? I’m not Dr. Bloody Bronowski.

Dr. Bronowski is a reference to the British mathematician, Jacob Bronowski (1908-1974). The sketch continues:

First Pepperpot: How does Dr. Bronowski know which zoo it came from?

Second Pepperpot: He knows everything.

First Pepperpot: Oh, I wouldn’t like that. It would take the mystery out of life. Anyway, if it came from the zoo it would have ‘property of the zoo’ stamped on it.

Second Pepperpot: No, it wouldn’t. They don’t stamp animals property of the zoo. You couldn’t stamp a huge lion.
First Pepperpot: They stamp them when they’re small.

Second Pepperpot: What happens when they molt?

First Pepperpot: Lions don’t molt.

Second Pepperpot: No, but penguins do. There, I’ve run rings around you logically.

First Pepperpot: Oh, intercourse the penguin.

This “double-act” (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 179) – meaning just two characters conversing in a sketch – is humorous in that Cleese and Chapman banter back and forth with funny lines. However, what is distinctly “Pythonesque” about this sketch is the ending.

Just like how the radio exploded earlier, the “Penguin on the Television Set” ends with an explosion. Flying Circus used repetition in episodes to connect sketches together by having contingent themes. After Chapman’s character exclaims, “Oh, intercourse the penguin,” Jones appears on the television screen:

TV Announcer: It’s just gone eight o’clock and time for the penguin on top of your television set to explode.

The penguin on the top of the set now explodes.

First Pepperpot: How did he know that was going to happen?

TV Announcer: It was an inspired guess.

In Flying Circus, reality is altered to de-familiarize the audience with generic television conventions. Not only does the announcer in the television studio know that the penguin would explode, but he also is able to respond to the comment Chapman’s character makes regarding his intuition.

At the beginning of the sketch, Cleese as the radio announcer indicated that the week’s episode of “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” had concluded; however, Flying Circus does not demonstrate that the members of Monty Python necessarily end certain content when the audience expects that they do. After responding to Chapman’s inquiry, Jones, on the television, says,
“And now….” Thus, “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” returns to its linking style not only to get to the last sketch of the episode, but also to provide commentary of an absurd nature, in some regards. The link begins with a superimposed arrow pointing at a person’s shin. Cleese returns as the disembodied narrator:

**Voice Over:** Number twenty-three: the shin.

*Cut to Reginald Maudling. A superimposed arrow points to his shin.*

**Voice Over:** Number twenty-four: Reginald Maudling’s shin.

*Cut to Gilliam-type open-head picture, with arrow superimposed.*

**Voice Over:** Number twenty-five: the brain.

*Cut to picture of Margaret Thatcher.*

**Voice Over:** Number twenty-six: Margaret Thatcher’s brain.

*The superimposed arrow appears on the image of Thatcher and points to her knee.*

In one shot, the members of Monty Python are not only illustrating humor as incongruity because, as everyone in the audience knows, a person’s brain is not located in their knee, but they are making fun of the future-Prime Minister as well by suggesting that the conservative politician does not have a brain in her head; thus, Thatcher is not presented as human. The link continues by returning to its previous fascination with naughty bits by showing a still photograph of a cricket match in progress with all the members of the team in Bermuda shorts:

**Voice Over:** Number twenty-seven: more naughty bits.

*Cut to picture of the cabinet at a table. Arrows point down below the table.*

**Voice Over:** Number twenty-eight: the naughty bits of the cabinet.

*Cut to studio shop of the next set: the interior of a country home. Superimposed arrow points to a lamp in the background.*

**Voice Over:** Number twenty-nine: the interior of a country home.
Doctor (Cleese): That’s not a part of the body.

Mother (Cleveland): No, it’s a link though.

Son (Chapman): I didn’t think it was very good.

Doctor: No, it’s the end of the series; they must be running out of ideas.

Characters, once again, are violating expectations by being aware of the television. This awareness destroys the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief. In other words, conventions are violated because the characters explicitly remind the television audience that the sketch is not a depiction of reality.

Palin did not believe he was convincing at playing authority figures, however one persona he did often fulfill on *Flying Circus* was that of a zealous authority figure. While he never felt that he was a convincing cop, bureaucrat, or military figure, he could play a surreal interpretation of an authority figure, usually by bursting into a room not entirely sure why he was there or what he was supposed to say:

Muffin (Palin): All right, don’t anybody more, there’s been a murder.

Mother: A murder?

Muffin: No…no…not a murder…no what’s like a murder only begins with B?

Son: Birmingham.

Muffin: No…no…no…no…no…

Doctor: Burnley?

Muffin: Burnley – that’s right! Burnley in Lancashire. There’s been a Burnley.

Son: Burglary.

Muffin: *(He points to the son.*) Burglary. Yes, good man. Burglary – that’s it, of course. There’s been a burglary.

Doctor: Where?
**Muffin:** In the back, just below the rib.

**Doctor:** No – that’s murder.

As Inspector Muffin, Palin plays a dosey authority figure that not only has issues keeping facts straight, but also criticizes Chapman’s character for being “too posh” multiple times during the sketch:

**Muffin (sarcastically):** Any clues, eh? Oh, we don’t talk half posh, don’t we? I suppose you say ‘ehnvelope’ and ‘larngerie’ and ‘sarndwiches on the settee!’ Well this is a murder investigation, young man, and a murder is a very serious business!

**Doctor:** I thought it was a burglary.

**Muffin:** Burglary is almost as serious a business as murder. Some burglaries are more serious than murder. A burglary in which someone gets stabbed is a murder! So don’t come to these petty distinctions with me. You’re as bad as a judge.

Inspector Muffin is immediately on the offense in his interaction with the other three. Throughout the sketch he becomes increasing accusatory, and yet continues to exhibit his failure to correctly control the situation as an inspector would be expected to. Instead, he continually berates Chapman any time a word with three or more syllables is used. He also calls Carol Cleveland “Boskovitch” when she offers him a cup of tea. The incompetent Muffin is later joined by Sergeant Duckie – played by Terry Jones – who sings a song called “I’m A Little Bit Sad and Lonely” with the Fred Tomlinson Singers dressed as policemen joining him in the chorus.

While the song is shocking to the audience because in reality they do not encounter plainclothes detectives who enter a room prepared with a song describing how they feel that day, even more shocking is when the chorus of policemen abruptly stop singing and say, “etcetera, etcetera” after the second verse. Canned applause – once again commenting on the artificial nature of such a television mode – is heard and then Idle, as a Eurovision girl – enters and completely disrupts the setting.
**Girl:** And that’s the final entry. La dernière entrée. Das final entry. And now, guten abend. Das scores. The scores. Les scores. Dei scores. Oh! Scores. Ha! Scores! *(cut to scoreboard in Chinese.)* Yes, Monaco is the winner – hah! Monaco is the linner – oh yes, man, Monaco’s won de big prize, bwana…and now, here’s Chief Inspector Jean-Paul Zatopathique with the winning score once again.

**Voice Over (Palin) (hushed tone):** And so, Inspector Zatopathique, the forensic expert from Monaco Murder Squad sings his song ‘Bing Tiddle Tiddle Bong.’

The burglary has been all but forgotten and instead the sketch moves towards a worldly performance of Chapman on a sound stage singing a most bizarre song that goes, “Bing tiddle tiddle bang. Bing tiddle tiddle bing. Bing tiddle tiddle tiddle tiddle. Bing tiddle tiddle tiddle bong.” For the audience, the absurdity has increased. While Sergeant Duckie’s song was unexpected, both in its beginning and its ending, the song of the Moroccan forensic expert is mere lunacy.

*Flying Circus* episodes did not have plots or conventional narrative structures. The members of Monty Python used repetition and recurring characters in individual episodes to illustrate continuity. Without a narrative, individual episodes were more difficult to end because the members of Monty Python did not have a climactic scene or joke that would establish an ending. In “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” the members of Monty Python used the link to provide an end for their episode once they reached thirty minutes. As Chapman – as Inspector Zatopathique – bows the audience has one last part of the body to recognize: a superimposed arrow points towards his rear, and Cleese’s voice can be heard saying, “Number thirty-one: the end.” Without a storyline, the members of Monty Python proved that television need not be constrained to generic conventions because they created television episodes, all the while violating generic conventions and expectations. Instead, a continued theme was present in the manner in which Monty Python transitioned between sketches.
*Spam: “My hovercraft is full of eels.”*

The episode “Spam” was highly regarded amongst the group as a strong episode. While filming in June of 1970, Michael Palin wrote in his diary, “The audience was full and, even in our completely straight red-herring opening – the start of a corny pirate film which went on for nearly five minutes – there was a good deal of laughter, just in anticipation. Then John’s ‘Hungarian Phrase Book’ sketch, with exactly the right amount of lunacy and scatology, received a very good reaction” (2006, pp. 28-29). By the end of the episode, the audience can ask themselves, “Why are there Vikings at the restaurant?” and “Why are they singing about spam?” While these questions are never answered – even years later (*Life of Python*, 1999) – “Spam” is an episode that, like others, violates generic expectations and uses incongruity as humor.

By the end of the second season, *Flying Circus* had an established cult audience. Python Pictures Ltd. had been created, meaning that the group owned their television show (Palin, 2006). “Spam” was broadcasted on BBC-1 on December 15, 1970 as the second-to-last episode of the second season. On the night of its broadcasts, the members of Monty Python went to Graham Chapman’s house to view the episodes and arrived at a general consensus that “Spam” was one of the most successful episodes they had done thus far in the series (Palin, 2006). From the opening of the episode that includes a false start with a fake pirate film, “Spam” violates generic expectations and includes humor that is clever, yet absurd.

To begin, the episode uses a false start by showing an entire credit list and playing epic-film-style music for a film entitled, “The Black Eagle.” False starts had previously been used by the members of Monty Python for individual sketches in *Flying Circus*, however not yet to the extreme that “Spam” had taken it to. The audience sees images of several pirates – none of which are played by Pythons – sitting in a lifeboat. In fact, it is nearly three minutes into the episode when the audience initially sees one of the members of Monty Python: John Cleese, as the announcer (a common image
for the faithful *Flying Circus* audience by this point in the series), sitting behind a desk on the beach while behind him pirates carry a treasure chest.

In “Spam,” the first words are not spoken until two-minutes-and-fifty-seven seconds into the episode. Each second that passes until Cleese says, “And now for something completely different” unsettles the audience and violates their expectations. By the end of the second season, audience members had come to expect that *Flying Circus* featured the burlesque by generating humor through incongruity, and yet the opening of “Spam” reacted against generic conventions all the more.

Following the opening animation, the members of Monty Python needed to establish the setting of the first sketch as taking place at a tobacconist shop immediately. Dressed as a fireman, Palin says, “Thank you very much for the change, Mr. Tobacconist” to Jones’ character, who is behind a cashier. Upon exiting the shot, Palin breaks character, and thus audience expectations, by asking, “Was that all right?” A “Shh!” is heard off-screen and Jones – who is still on camera – rolls his eyes in response to Palin’s characters unprofessional interaction with the television camera and being on film.

Recalling the false start at the beginning of the episode, the same music begins to play. Behind the cashier, Jones busies himself so that the audience has the time to read the caption – in an identical typeface to “The Black Eagle” credits – that rolls up the screen. Just like how “The Black Eagle” began the caption with “In 1742 the Spanish Empire lay in ruins,” Monty Python mimicked the style. However, as the audience quickly realizes, captions done by the members of Monty Python in *Flying Circus* are far more absurd than an epic buccaneer film allows for. The caption reads, “In 1970, the British Empire lay in ruins, foreign nationals frequented the streets – many of them Hungarians (not the streets – the foreign nationals). Anyway many of these Hungarians went in to tobacconist’s shops to buy cigarettes…” Next, Cleese, as a Hungarian carrying a phrase book to help
him translate, walks in and approaches Jones to ask for cigarettes – just as the captions foretold – by saying, “I will not buy this record. It is scratched.”

The humor in *Flying Circus* is not particularly complicated. The members of Monty Python enjoyed acting in an absurd manner on the lone basis that they were not supposed to. In other words, they often mocked the culture of the “emotionless English” (*Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut*, 2009). Although the absurd lines are being delivered by a Hungarian character, the subtle humor in the sketch can be seen in Jones as he grown more and more uncomfortable with each misused phrase:

**Tobacconist:** No, no, no. This…tobacconist’s.

**Hungarian:** Ah! I will not buy this tobacconist’s. It is scratched.

**Tobacconist:** No, no, no…tobacco…er, cigarettes?

**Hungarian:** Yes, cigarettes. My hovercraft is full of eels.

By saying “My hovercraft is full of eels,” Cleese’s character is trying to communicate that he would like matches. Up until this point, Cleese’s lines have all been absurd, but not yet dirty. The sketch could easily continue with arbitrary, nonsensical statements. However, the members of Monty Python often liked to push boundaries even farther. Before they began working on *Flying Circus*, they had seen Spike Milligan violate generic expectations. To follow, they wanted to push beyond the path Milligan had paved. The “Dirty Hungarian Phrasebook” sketch does just that as it continues:

**Hungarian:** Er, do you want…do you want to come back to my place, bouncy bouncy? […] You great pouf.

**Tobacconist:** That will be six and six please.

**Hungarian:** If I said you had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me? I am no longer infected.
Initial viewing of “Spam” might lead a person to think that the British comedy troupe was xenophobic, yet within a more discrete commentary, it is actually convention that is to blame and be ridiculed.

Once Jones’ character has become thoroughly uncomfortable in the presence of the looming Hungarian character, he asks to see the phrasebook so that he might be able to communicate the price in Hungarian in order to avoid further talk of infections. What follows this are several Python traits that the members of Monty Python used to break generic conventions. Jones said three Hungarian words, of which the audience can deduce are inappropriate between Cleese’s character immediately punches him between the eyes. The force is enough for Jones to fall to the floor. *Flying Circus* also played with the concept of reality, not only by using absurdity in the script, but also altering human capabilities in order to promote comedy. Immediately after Cleese’s character hits Jones, the camera cuts to Chapman – once again playing a police officer, a frequent persona he played in the series. Chapman instantly ceases all movement and holds his hand to his ear, indicating that he heard the blow. At this time, the audience does not yet know Chapman’s distance from the tobacconist’s shop. However, if Chapman could hear a punch while out patrolling a city street, logically Chapman could not be very far away – most likely, immediately outside the shop. However, against what the audience might logically expect Chapman runs down three different long city blocks and around two corners before bursting into the shop with an authoritative, “What’s going on here then?”

The members of Monty Python wanted to get as much as they could out of the “Dirty Hungarian Phrasebook” because the humor and comic timing was just right for the show. Both characters in the sketch thought they were innocent party who had been wronged by the fresh-mouthed other:

**Hungarian:** *(He opens book and frantically points at tobacconist.)* You have beautiful thighs.
Policeman: What?

Tobacconist: He hit me.

Hungarian: Drop your panties, Sir William. I cannot wait till lunchtime.

Chapman’s character has identified which party must be guilty due to the fact that Cleese’s character thinks he is saying something different due to the error in his Hungarian-to-English phrasebook. As the policemen grabs Cleese by both arms and drags him out the door, a bewildered and confused Cleese hollers, “My nipples explode with delight.”

For a member of the audience who watched the sketch alone and out of the context of the rest of the episode, it is funny, but not the same for the audience member who sees “Spam” in its entirety. If an audience member was to cease viewing the episode immediately following Chapman ushering Cleese out of the shop, they would be missing out on more examples from the phrasebook. In the next scene, Alexander Yahlt, as played by Palin, is charged for the offense of publishing a phrasebook “with intent to cause a breach of the peace.” The previous chapter (p. 49) discusses Flying Circus’ portrayal of the court – often undermined by those appearing in court – however, this chapter examines absurdity as separated from the satire of the overall justice system.

Among the translated phrases shared from the phrasebook are “Please fondle my bum” in place of “Can you direct me to the train station?” Years later, Cleese explained that the members of Monty Python were not acutely aware that their television show was having the impact that it did on comedy at the time, and instead they were experimenting with methods in order to have fun. For Palin’s character, he wishes “to plead incompetence.” However, by the time “Spam” aired, the members of Monty Python certainly seemed to know what they were doing. Beginning with a witness – who is simply a black-and-white photo of a girl in a bikini on a piece of cardboard – the other characters take on the same form. Once the characters in the sketch have all become black-and-white
images on pieces of cardboard, the sketch transitions to the cartoon. The cartoon shows animated of protesters walking past a black-and-white photo of the judge with picket signs in their hands.

“World Forum” can be described as television’s poor answer to the study of history and politics from other cultures. As the host of a television game show, Idle asks Karl Marx (Jones), Vladimir Lenin (Cleese), Che Guevara (Chapman), and Mao Tse-tung (Neil Innes) questions about British football teams. Even in the “special gifts section” when Karl Marx is hoping to win a lounge suit by answering questions “on the workers’ control of factories,” the final question is a return to the intellectualism of the un-educated masses:

**Presenter:** One final question Karl and the beautiful lounge suite will be yours…Karl Marx, your final question, who won the Cup Final in 1949?

**Karl Marx:** The workers’ control of the means of production? The struggle of the urban proletariat?

**Presenter:** No. It was in fact, Wolverhampton Wanderers who beat Leicester 3-1.

Following stock footage of a goal being scored and crowds cheering, a closing caption appears on the screen that details who will appear on “World Forum” in the next episode. The caption is quite generic except its context reading, “Next week, four leading heads of state of the Afro-Asian Nations against Bristol Rovers at Molineux.” Once again, political thinkers and figures are juxtaposed with soccer players.

From the ending caption, the episode transitions into an animation. What the audience sees is an animated hand appear on the bottom of the screen. A disembodied voice says, “Just the word I was looking for,” and the hand then removes the word “Molineux” from the rest of the caption. Following a short visual gag that involves a painting of the Virgin Mary, the episode cuts to a stock drawing of a World War I trench scene with a British helmet place atop of a bayonet. This image is meant to establish a time period for the following sketch. However, captions – in the same font as the captions
used earlier in the episode – also help to introduce a setting. Yet, as with other Flying Circus sketches, the captions are not quite what the audience would expect.

The caption leading into the “Ypres 1914” sketch has several similarities to the earlier captions. The white font is identical. Also, the caption has a similar opening statement. As the words roll up the screen, Palin’s voice reads, “In 1914, the balance of power lay in ruins. Europe was plunged into bloody conflict. Nation fought nation. But no nation fought nation more than the English – hip hip hooray! Nice, nice! Yah boo. Phillip’s a German and he have my pen.” Palin’s performance as a narrator begs an interruption. Later, this interruption and need for control and limiting of absurdities play a part in the sketch itself. At first though, a red caption rolls up the screen with Cleese’s voice reading, “Start again.” At this order, Palin and the white caption are once again focused. Still using repetition in phrasing, the caption that rolls up the screen now reads, “In 1914, the balance of power lay in ruins.”

Even though the words “Ypres 1914” appear on the screen and several characters are dressed as World War I soldiers, other characters are entirely out of place in the scene. Surrounding the soldiers are a sheikh, a Viking warrior, a male mermaid, a nun, a milkman, and a Greek Orthodox priest. Several sketches in Flying Circus – especially in “Spam” – feature characters that are out of place. In other words, none of these additional characters fit the surroundings of a World War I trench. In the sketch, the soldiers’ confusion is apparent as they look around perplexed. Although they are confused, they are aware that since they are on television, they must maintain the illusion of normalcy:

Sergeant (Palin) (confused and uncomfortable): Jenkins?

Jenkins (Idle) (equally uncomfortable): Yes, sir.

Sergeant: What are you going to do when you get back to Blighty?

Jenkins: I don’t know, sarge…I expect I’ll be looking after me mum. She’ll be getting on a bit now.
**Sergeant:** Got a family of your own ‘ave you?

**Jenkins:** No, she’s…she’s all I got left now. My wife, Doreen…she…I got a letter.

Finally, a floor manager – played by Terry Jones – enters into shot and he tries to set the scene straight. Jones ushers all of those not in World War I costumes off of the stage. The entrance of Jones’ character not only draws further attention to the fact the “Spam” had featured such out-of-place characters, however he also illustrates the artificial aspect of television sketches. Jones reminds the *Flying Circus* audience that it was 1970, not 1914. The sketch is essentially a sketch about a sketch, not a sketch about World War I soldiers.

Jones’ character must restart the sketch several times. Each time, audience expectations are violated because the narrative structure is broken. After Jones herds out the various out-of-place characters, he restarts the sketch first because the caption reads, “Knickers 1914” and then because he has noticed a spaceman is hiding in the background. The audience might by now associate a pattern and expect the sketch to start again after the spaceman is removed, however instead Jones’ character has decided that the sketch needs a longer break in order to work out the kinks. While his directions to the camera are not as authoritative as Chapman’s Colonel’s directions were in “Full Frontal Nudity,” they are still verbal transitions. He says, “Come on please. It’s no good, loves. It’s no good. We’ll have to leave it for now. Come back when everyone’s settled down a bit. So, that means we go over to the Art Room, all right. So cue camera three!” Following the manager’s directions, camera three is cued up and the image is projected onto the screen. The image is not of an Art Room, instead it is a call back to the “World Forum” sketch by showing Karl Marx and Che Guevara locked in a passionate embrace. The manager quickly realizes his error and says, “Sorry, camera four.”

After that brief moment of surprise, the audience enters the fantastic concept of the “Famous Paintings on Strike” sketch. Earlier in the episode, animated individuals were seen with picket signs after the court scene. This sketch allowed for more interaction between live-action and Gilliam’s
animations. While Palin and Idles, as two stuffy art critics, stand in front of a large Renaissance painting watching the going-ons, two dimensional paintings become people and the surreal, dream-like state of *Flying Circus* is achieved:

**Country Bumpkin (Jones):** Hello son, your dad in?

**Cherub (Gilliam):** Yes.

**Country Bumpkin:** Can I speak to him please? It’s the man from ‘The Hay Wain.’

**Cherub:** Who?

**Bumpkin:** The man from ‘The Hay Wain’ by Constable.

**Cherub:** Dad…it’s the man from ‘The Hay Way’ by Constable to see you.

**Solomon (Chapman) (off-screen):** Coming.

*Sound of footsteps. Cut to another close up on the painting to show the main figure disappearing. This figure suddenly put his head round the door.*

**Solomon:** Hello? How are you? Come on in.

**Country Bumpkin:** No, no can’t stop, just passing by, actually.

**Solomon:** Oh, where are you now?

**Country Bumpkin:** Well may you ask. We just been moved in next to a room full of Brueghels…terrible bloody din. Skating all hours of the night. Anyway, I just dropped in to tell you there’s been a walk-out in the Impressionists. […] It started with the ‘Dejeuner Sur L’Herbe’ lot, evidently they were moved away from above the radiator or something.

While it is absurd for a sketch to feature paintings that have gone on strike, the surreal element of the sketch as a whole is the reason and justification for this strike: being moved away from the radiator. Recognizable works of art, including the Birth of Venus and the Mona Lisa, leave the surround of their paintings to go on strike. Meanwhile, a radio announcer’s voice – provided by Palin – covers the story of the strike.
The same radio announcer also takes the audience back to the sketch involving the World War I soldiers saying, “Meanwhile, at Television Centre work began again on a sketch about Ypres. A spokesman for the sketch said: he fully expected it to be more sensible this time.” By now, the Flying Circus audience is familiar with the opening caption and the harmonica being played. Now that the scene is rid of spacemen, nuns, and others, the sketch carries on with the absurdity and humor largely being represented by an army Major played by Chapman, who is not as noble and brave as he would like to appear, as described in chapter two (pp. 55-56).

Following Cleese’s characters failure to raise his arms in order to indicate that he does not want to shoot himself, the sketch links to the “Royal Hospital for Overacting” sketch. As common in many cinematic depictions of war, one character makes a long, impassioned speech when facing his death. While Cleese is speaking two 1970-ambulance attendants enter the scene and lower Cleese onto a stretcher and into an ambulance that is also from 1970, not 1914. The ambulance races through the urban streets before parking outside of a large building and carrying a fully blanket ed Cleese out of the back. At this point, Cleese is finishing up his monologue with great flourish and valor saying, “Freedom from fear and freedom from oppression. Freedom from tyranny. A world where men and women of all races and creeds can live together in communion and then in the twilight of this life, our children, and our children’s children.” A sign on the side of the building that reads, “Royal Hospital for Over-Acting” is not only a transition into the next sketch, but a commentary on film conventions. The members of Monty Python regarded these long, monologues as being too dramatic, as seen by the absurdity of Cleese delivering lines even when his character is supposed to be dead.

In the interior of this hospital, other over-actors are seen. As a specialist, Chapman walks down the corridor past a line of several Long John Silvers – from Treasure Island – who are shouting, “Aha! Jim Lad!” To the camera, Chapman explains, “All our patients here are suffering from severe over-acting. When they’re brought in they’re all really over the top. And it’s our job to try and treat
the condition of over-acting.” Having just seen Cleese’s turn to a cinematic war hero, complete with a farewell speech delivered as he was dragged off set, the audience connects the previous sketch with a sketch that involves a room of several Richard III all of whom are continuous repeating, “A horse. A horse. My kingdom for a horse,” and entirely unable to say anything else.

Moving from one Shakespearian character to another, Chapman’s character next opens a doorway where Gilliam has animated two individuals performing a scene from Hamlet while being able to decapitate themselves without losing their place in the script. Chapman had called these animated Hamlets evidence of “some very nasty cases indeed.” Not only are these animations examples of over-acting because the characters continue to repeat the words, “To be or not to be. That is the question,” but also these animated over-acting Hamlets have decided that the best way to get a skull for the scene in question is by removing their own heads.

From decapitation comes flowers. In between, an atomic bomb is dropped – in the form of animation. Yet, instead of the expected rise of the mushroom cloud, it is a bouquet of flowers. Following stock footage of flowers comes the arrival of Palin’s “vocal nemesis” (Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut, 2009). Mr. D. P. Gumby – along with his recognizable, to Flying Circus fans that are familiar with the inarticulate, idiotic Gumbies who had been appearing on the series since the first season, knotted handkerchief and fake mustache – is prepared to teach the viewing public how to arrange flowers as only so bizarre and ill-spoken can:

**Gumby (Palin):** Good evening. First take a bunch of flowers. (*He grabs flowers from the table in front of him.*) Pretty begonias, irises, freesias and cry-manthesums…then arrange them nicely in a vase. (*He thrusts the flowers head downwards into the vase and stuffs them in wildly; he even bangs them with a mallet in an attempt to get them all in the vase.*) Get in! Get in! Get in!
For the fans of *Flying Circus*, the Gumby characters had become a favorite and the equivalent of a court jester, someone to laugh at on the basis of their idiocy. While the episode did not address the reasoning for many characters that did not logically match the setting in which they appeared, the Gumbies never needed justification for their behavior. Audience liked to laugh at them because they liked the reminder that even if they did not graduate from elite universities or come from families that were well off, they always embraced the rallying cry that they were better than the Gumbies.

“Gumby Flower Arranging” is absurd, and the sketch is short. What follows is a collective, longer moment of every absurdity in the episode as a whole, including features that had not yet been used. Using the visual linking of Mr. Gumby shoving flowers into a vase right to Jones as a waitress stuffing a chicken, the “Spam” sketch takes off into absurdity. During the sketch, the word “spam” is used one-hundred-and-seven times. Yet, before the first utterance of the word, already there are Vikings, and Mr. Bun (Idle) and Mrs. Bun (Chapman) make their entrance by being lowered into chairs on wires instead of walking through the door.

Absurdity builds as the waitress reveals that every item on the menu not only includes spam, but in fact spam is a large percentage of the ingredients. All to the delight of Mr. Bun and the Vikings who sing a song about spam – through repetition of the word “spam” – who regard spam as both “lovely” and “wonderful.” Before concluding the episode with ending captions – which are slightly different in this episode because they continue the over-use of the word spam, including in the performer’s names – Cleese’s Hungarian character from the beginning of the episode returns once again hoping to use his phrasebook in order to purchase something. One of the “major formal hallmarks” (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 200), repetition provides continuity in an episode whereas several other sketch comedy programs resist overlapping. The repetition and overlap of characters into multiple sketches in an episode like “Spam” allows the audience to see one character in multiple
absurd situations; however, if the episode is watched in its entirety – as was done in this study – the humor is successful in generating laughter.

*The Money Programme:* “I’d like to have an argument, please.”

The comic song is one of the “major forms of variety comedy” (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 179). Both in Britain (*Do Not Adjust Your Set* [1967-1969]) and the United States (*The Smothers Brothers’ Comedy Hour* [1967-1970]), sketches were often separated by having a musical number performed between sketches. In *Flying Circus*, the use of the comic song was often either a collection of nonsense syllables put to music – such as the ending of “How to Recognize Different Parts of the Body” – or tacked on to the end of a sketch that can completely change the tone of all the lines delivered before – such as the case of “Homicidal Barber/The Lumberjack Song” from the first season. The twenty-ninth episode of *Flying Circus* featured a comic song at the beginning.

John Cleese said that he believed himself to be the worst singer in all of Europe; however, he admired Eric Idle’s musical ability – both in performance and song-writing (*Life of Python*, 1999). “The Money Programme” was first broadcast on November 2, 1972. The episode begins with Idle as a presenter on a mock-television program that consists of Idle sitting behind a long table talking to various guests about money. As he explains, “Tonight on ‘The Money Programme,’ we’re going to look at money. Lots of it. On film and in the studio,” Idle gets over-excited imagining all the different ways to possibly count money. Throughout his monologue, Idle collects himself only to get more worked up. By the end – before breaking into song – he stands on the desk in a state of excited alliteration, and says, “All money. I’ve always wanted money. To handle, to touch. The smell of rain-washed florin. The lure of the lira. The glitter of the guinea. The romance of the ruble. The feel of the franc, the heel of the Deutschmark, the cold antiseptic sting of the Swiss franc, and the sun-burned splendor of the Australian dollar.” As with other escalation monologues – meaning monologues that continue further than the audience expects them to, often without a concluding punch-line – in *Flying
Monty Python wanted to find an ending beside the generic punch-line that is expected in sketch comedy. Fortunately, Idle was clever enough to write songs that parody the generic comic song and point out how constrained the convention is.

“The Money Song” is different than “The Lumberjack Song;” Monty Python did not want to repeat their older material. Idle wanted a clever, quick song so that although the song came at the end of a sketch in place of a generic conclusion and had costumed back-up singers, Flying Circus fans could not say, “That’s just like Palin’s and Jones’ ‘Lumberjack Song.’” Instead, “The Money Song” continued Idle’s use of alliteration and surprised the audience members by having five male singers appear on stage in a national Welsh costume that is worn by women. Rather than generating laughter by clownish, cartoon humor, “The Money Song” has a more discrete, quick-witted humor in addition to the gendered costumes. Idle sings, “There is nothing quite as wonderful as money.” He shares that he has pounds in his pajamas, francs in his fridge, and enough dollar bills to buy the Brooklyn Bridge. Just when the audience is expecting a big finish, the camera quickly cuts to Terry Jones as the nude organist — a staple of the third season — who plays the final note before he turns to the camera and grins. By ending the song with the anti-climatic image of Jones as the nude organist instead of a more conventional big finish and applause, “The Money Song” violates expectations. Like other Flying Circus sketches, the content escalates into nothing. The song does not end with fanfare. Instead, after Jones, the shot cuts to Cleese as the announcer at his desk who says, “And now…” Next is a quick cut to Michael Palin as the It’s-Man who says, “It’s” before the opening title animation sequence begins.

With the use of burlesque (defined in chapter one, p. 7) in Flying Circus comes incongruity in the form of anachronisms. Following the opening titles, a superimposed caption reads, “Erizabeth L.” The misspelling of the name is connected to the sketch; however, at first glance the audience does not know what to think. Before “The Money Programme” addresses the reversal of “L”s and “R”s, establishing shots of an exterior of an Elizabethan palace with Elizabethan music playing implies that
the next sketch is meant to take place during the Elizabethan era (1558-1603). In addition, Palin plays a messenger; he is dressed in Elizabethan style. However, Palin is riding a moped in the palace corridor. He gets off one moped only to walk past a door with three loud trumpets playing and there he gets on a different moped. Palin rides the second moped over to the throne where Queen Elizabeth – played by Graham Chapman – and her courtiers are awaiting Palin’s arrival, each of the members of the court on a motor bike of their own; only the queen is sitting in a throne.

The members of Monty Python were not the first comics to use anachronism – meaning an intentional or unintentional error in chronology. Therefore, this sketch goes beyond the presence of mopeds in sixteenth century Britain. Although “it’s bleeding weird having half the Tudor nobility ligging around on motorized bicycles,” what is even more surreal – or “sullear,” as the case may be – is that in the sketch, “L”s and “R”s are interchanged:

**Queen:** What news from Plymouth?

**Messenger:** Drake has sighted the Spanish Freet, youl Majesty.

**Queen:** So! Phirip’s garreons ale hele. How many?

**Messenger:** One hundled and thilty-six men of wal.

**Leicester (Idle):** Broody harr.

If the purpose of the “Erizabeth L” sketch was to understand what should be said, the sketch would not work because 1972 was a time before the digital video recording. Since “Erizabeth L” becomes a sketch about abuse – Chapman and Cleese’s writing specialty – the sketch is humorous, even in a pre-DVR era.

The *Flying Circus* audience needs to be quick enough to pick up that “L”s and “R”s are switched. While language tricks are done elsewhere in the series, the true humor of the sketch is the interruption of the generic form. When Jones – as a Japanese man pretending to be Italian director,
Luchino Visconti (1906-1976) – enters, the others break character and respond to him in a manner that suggests they are not happy with him:

**Japanese Man:** That was telliber.

**Leicester:** What?

**Japanese Man:** Telliber.

**Leicester:** Oh! Solly.

**Japanese Man:** When you have a rine, ling youl berr.

**Leicester:** Ling my berr?

**Japanese Man:** *(Ringing his bell on his moped for him.)* Ling ling. Rike this. And cut the broody herr. Erizabeth!

**Queen (cheesed off):** Yes?

**Japanese Man:** You should be on a bicycer.

**Queen:** Why?!?

**Japanese Man:** You rook odd rike that.

**Queen:** I do not look odd like this – it’s that lot that looks odd. It’s bleeding weird having half the Tudor nobility ligging around on motorized bicycles.

Chapman’s character not only dropped the letter switching when Jones’ character first appeared, but he returned to his normal male voice. Doing so violates generic conventions because the performers in a sketch broke character in order to complain. The Japanese man – still pretending he is the famous Italian director – tried to explain his reasoning and the brilliance behind having mopeds in the Elizabethan era as the sketch continues:

**Japanese Man:** It’s vely sullearist.

**Queen:** Horse feathers!

**Leicester:** Listen mate. I’m beginning to have my doubts about you.
Idle’s character has also broken away from the Elizabethan storyline about the invading Spanish Fleet. With Chapman and Idle both staring him down and saying that they do not believe he is Visconti, Jones tries his best to lie and then escape, all the while still interchanging letters:

**Japanese Man:** Lubbish! Me genuine wop. (*He sings.*) Alliveldelchi Loma—

**Leicester:** He’s bluffing.

**Japanese Man (sings):** Vo-oorale…Ooh…Is that the time, I must fry.

*The door opens. Inspector Leopard runs through the door followed by a copper.*

**Inspector Leopard (Cleese):** No so fast, Yakomoto. (*Trumpeters play a fanfare.*) Shut up! (*Fanfare stops.*) Allow me to introduce myself. I am Inspector Leopard of Scotland Yard, Special Fraud Film Director Squad.

**Court:** Leopard of the Yard!

**Inspector Leopard:** The same. Only more violent.

As a member of the fictitious Fraud Film Director Squad, a collective of investigators who seek out members of the public who are misrepresenting themselves as famous film directors, Leopard has come to arrest Jones’ character, identified as Yakomoto. However, instead of instantly arresting him, Cleese character instead enters a two minute monologue.

For two minutes, Cleese’s character carries on a monologue that overviews several of Visconti’s films. This description has allowed Jones’ character to escape. However, instead of responding as the audience would expect an Inspector to respond when the suspect has escaped, Cleese chooses to settle:

**Inspector Leopard:** And so, Yakomoto…blimey, he’s gone! Never mind. I’ll have you instead. (*He grabs the queen.*)

**Queen:** What?

**Inspector Leopard:** I haven’t got time to go chasing after him, there’s violence to be done.
Cleese’s remark is a violation of expectations. In addition by implying that he has violent acts left to commit, Leopard is justifying the violent theme that is used in the remainder of the episode. In fact, the character of Leopard is also the first established use recurring police inspectors in “The Money Programme.” Through the rest of the episode, violence-loving police inspectors continually appear.

First, is a theme of recurring violence. Unexpected in television comedy, Gilliam explains, “When you turned on Python it was kind of a dangerous experience – you didn’t know what would happen. The element of surprise is essential to what Python’s about, this refreshing original, outrageous thing” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 199). The animation that follows the “Erizabeth L” sketch builds on Cleese’s final line by involving violence. First, a dismembered policeman’s head is place atop a squad car in place of a more conventional siren. As this car rides passed a building, a criminal – identifiable by a white-and-black striped shirt – looks out and waits until the car is out of sight before jumping out and demanding a pedestrian “stick ‘em up.”

Gilliam’s animations found humor in the bizarre. While the generic script of a television show’s use of a mugging – even when used in comedy – does not turn out like the short encounter in “The Money Programme.” As ordered, the animated pedestrian raises two hands in the air; however, the interaction does not end there. As it turns out, the pedestrian has more than just two arms. Upon raising each of his eight arms, humor is generated through absurdity. While audience expectations were initially violated because of the unnatural number of arms, the relationship between the pedestrian and the mugger change quickly. The victimization is reversed, and therefore the cartoon with the gun is no longer the violent individual in the encounter. Instead, with all eight of his arms, the pedestrian takes control by smashing the robber’s head between all of his hands.

Animations lead right into live action by connecting themes. From the animation that is centered on the concept of violence, the camera cuts to a radio. On the radio guests were discussing “liberal rubbish” by answering the question, “What would [you] do if [you] were Hitler?” One of the
replies is, “Well I’d do the Reichstag bathroom in purples and gold and ban abortion on demand.”

Off-camera the members of Monty Python would occasionally comment on politics. However, on-camera in *Flying Circus* politicians – both British and otherwise – were among those who were too boring and serious. The members of Monty Python had at their disposal an arsenal of humor. In other words, instead of using political rhetoric in *Flying Circus*, they focused on the absurd in order to violate audience expectations.

The sketch continues with absurdist humor – although no longer related to Hitler – and uses television’s modes of captioning to illustrate narrative. Idle asks his wife – played by Jones – for a side dish for his halibut. He asks, “What fish have you got that isn’t juggled, then?” To this, the answer is rabbit:

**Man:** What? Rabbit fish?

**Woman:** Yes. It’s got fins.

**Man:** Is it dead?

**Woman:** Well, it was coughing up blood last night.

**Man:** All right I’ll have the dead unjuggled rabbit fish.

The sketch does not show the two consuming this meal, instead a television technique is used to move along. Captions against a black screen are used in television, most often to demonstrate the passage of time. Captions are often specific to the amount of time that has passed, mostly in terms of hours, days, and weeks. In “The Money Programme,” the caption is indeed specific to the amount of time that is passed; however the caption does not reflect time in terms of hours. Instead the caption reads, “One dead unjuggled rabbit fish later.”

Monty Python’s repetition motivates much of their humor. In a single episode – and even in a single sketch – they seek to use a technique multiple times. This repetition is not typically used in the genre of sketch comedy because sketches are often times segments that are not part of a larger
contextual narrative. However, in this same sketch, captions are once again used for the same purpose of indicating the passage of time by associating time with an unexpected action. In the sketch, Idle’s character inquires what is available for dessert. He learns that he is being offered various desserts with rats as a particularly crucial ingredient. Even the strawberry tart has three rats – “rather a lot, really” – in it. Idle requests “a slice without so much rat in it.” Once again, a caption appears that indicates in specific terms how much time has passed.

Following the “Dead Bishops on the Landing” sketch (see chapter two, p. 57) the episode links back to an animation. Palin, as the Church Policeman, says, “I’d like to conclude this arrest with a hymn.” While Idle’s character is led out of shot, Chapman and Jones each produce a small green hymn book and begin to sing. As the hymn builds, the camera pans upwards before it eventually lands on a Gilliam interpretation of the heavens, with picturesque sun and clouds. In this dream-like image, the sun opens like a door and an animated woman with a broom leers outward. The surreal nature of the animation continues when using the broom, the woman causes Queen Victoria – whose reign ran from 1837-1901 – who had been floating nearby to fall towards back towards Earth.

When the image of Queen Victoria hit the ground, her successor – and son – Edward VII, who was almost sixty-years-old when he began his 1901-1910 reign, is awaiting her fall. While the audience might expect more violence in this Flying Circus animation because of the concept being presented, instead the context is more whimsical. King Edward VII watches Queen Victoria hit the ground and then bounce back into the air. The animation becomes more bizarre when Edward VII is seen enjoying using the likeness of his mother as a bouncy ball. In other words, as Queen Victoria bounces off the ground, the image of Edward VII, who “was no rebel but nor was he wholly respectable” (Clarke, 2004, p. 36), is shown enjoying using his mother as a toy in the wilderness.

The animation lasts long enough for the audience to gain the assumption that King Edward VII could happily spend long periods of time participating in this un-kingly activity, before Cleese’s
voice transitions to the next sketch. Cleese’s voice announces, “Meanwhile in the jungle next door” to establish the “Jungle Restaurant” sketch. The sketch is established as the beginnings of an adventure film: sweaty foreheads, thick undergrowth, eyes continually searching the horizon. However, when the guide points straight ahead, the audience unexpectedly finds that the search party has encountered a restaurant in the heart of the jungle:

First Explorer (Cleese): What a simply super little place!

Second Explorer (Idle): Yes, they’ve done wonders with it. You know this used to be one of the most swampy disease-infested areas of the whole jungle, and they’ve turned it into this smashing little restaurant.

Only in Flying Circus could “disease-infested” eventually translated to “smashing little restaurant.”

Even as other patrons are dragged away screaming in pain as they are tortured – off-camera – the group of explorers continue mundane conversation about what they would like to order.

In the sketch, drum beats indicate impending danger, however before anything is shown, the camera quickly cuts to the BBC-1 symbol. Idle’s voice explains that in consideration of younger viewers, the subsequent capture scene would not be seen because “it is not considered suitable for family viewing” (see chapter two, p. 45) Upon returning to the story, the audience sees that the group of explorers have been caught. Rather than telling a narrative as expected, the remainder of the sketch reminds the audience of the artificialness of television. For example, characters cannot remember their lines. As a native, Palin runs into shot holding a script asking the tied up explorers, “What page please? […] What page in the script?”

Later, it seems that the end is near for the explorers. Driven to despair, Chapman’s character says, “All that’ll be left of us will be a map, a compass, and a few feet of film, recording our last moments.” The recognition of end is not handled by the characters in a way that fits generic
expectations. Instead of a narrative of heroics and bravery, *Flying Circus* has drawn a different conclusion to the situation:

**First Explorer:** Wait a moment! [...] If we’re on film, there must be someone filming us.

**Second Explorer:** My God, Betty, you’re right!

*They all look around, then gradually all notice the camera. They break out in smiles of relief, come towards the camera and greet the crew.*

**Third Explorer (Chapman):** Look! Great to see you!

**First Explorer:** What a stroke of luck!

**Camera Crew:** Hello!...

**First Explorer:** Wait a minute! [...] If this is the crew who were filming us…who’s filming us now? Look!

The repetition not only motivates humor, but it also is a commentary of the artificial nature of television and film. In television, the audience is often in a state of a willing suspension in disbelief. In other words, although they know that the story is fictional, they pretend otherwise in order to engage in the story. *Flying Circus* violates this state by having characters interact with film crews and completely break away from the assumed script.

When Jones, who is once again pretending to be a famous director, interrupts the explorer’s interaction with the film crew, calls the action “No good,” *Flying Circus* violates expectations through the burlesque by showing a door in the jungle. Although no wall surrounds the door, Idle, as Inspector Baboon of the same Fraud Film Director Squad as Inspector Leopard from earlier in “The Money Programme,” enters through the door ready to make his arrest. This time as Idle narrates the life and work of “Signor Michelangelo Antonioni” the ending credits roll with the music playing faintly. This episode is like several episodes from the second season of *Flying Circus* that ran the ending credits over dialogue; however, unlike previous seasons, following the conclusion of the credits, “The Money
Programme” cuts to the BBC-1 symbol. Idle’s voice says, “And now on BBC-1, another six minutes of Monty Python’s Flying Circus.” Monty Python not only played with the ending of sketches, but also the endings of entire episodes. Sure enough, the audience gets another six minutes of “The Money Programme” as Palin’s character walks into shot and tells Rita Davies – who is playing a receptionist – “I’d like to have an argument please.”

Harry Brighouse observed that the “Argument Clinic” sketch echoes British tradition, especially Cleese continued claim that a contradiction is the same as an argument. He writes, “Slyly evoking the English pantomime tradition, the professional arguer simply contradicts every statement that the man seeking the argument makes” (2006, p. 54). While Cleese’s character corrects Palin saying that Palin had come in for an argument, not necessarily a “good” argument as Palin insists, the sketch largely is comprised of straight contradiction.

The sketch – and the episode as a whole – draws to its conclusion when Palin seeks out a room in which he can make a complaint only to learn that in this unassuming office corridor there is a room for nearly every activity, including being hit on the head. That is exactly what happens when he walks into a room in which Jones is waiting by the door to knock him on the head and then instruct him in the best noise to make as a reaction:

Man: I came here to complain.

Spreaders (Jones): Oh I’m sorry, that’s next door. It’s being hit on the head lessons in here.

Man: What a stupid concept.

Like in other sketches, a character’s commentary on the absurdity of a sketch was a cue for an authority figure to interrupt the sketch. Like earlier in the episode, Scotland Yard inspectors enter with a list of offenses:

Inspector Fox (Chapman): I’m charging you two under Section 21 of the Strange Sketch Act.
Man: The what?

Inspector Fox: You are hereby charged that you did willfully take part in a strange sketch, that is, a skit, spoof or humorous vignette of an unconventional nature with intent to cause grievous mental confusion to the Great British Public. [...] Right, come on down the Yard.

Another inspector arrives.

Inspector (Idle): Hold it. Hold it. Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Inspector Thompson’s Gazelle of the Programme Planning Police, Light Entertainment Division, Special Flying Squad. [...] Now I’m arresting this entire show on three counts: one, acts of self-conscious behavior contrary to the ‘Not in front of the children’ Act, two, always saying ‘It’s so and so of the Yard’ every time the fuzz arrives and, three, and this is the cruncher, offenses against the ‘Getting out of sketches without using a proper punch-line’ Act, four, namely, simply ending every bleeding sketch by just having a policeman come in and…wait a minute.

Policeman (Cleese): Hold it.

In *Flying Circus*, the members of Monty Python were proud of the conventions that they were violating. Much of their humor was generated through a violation of expectations by refusing to be confined by reality. When the BBC-1 symbol is shown with Idle’s promise of “one more minute of *Monty Python’s Flying Circus,*” immediately before a black screen, “The Money Programme” violates expectations further. After all, previously the audience saw six more minutes of the episode, yet when the promise of another minute is made, the episode instead ends going straight to a black screen.

*The All-England Summarize Proust Competition:* “Strangling animals, golf, and masturbation.”

“The All England Summarize Proust Competition” is the thirty-first episode of the season and the most famous example of BBC’s censorship in *Flying Circus*. In September 1972, the Duncan Wood, head of Comedy at the BBC, ordered a series of cuts to be made in the third season. Writing in
his diary from Munich on September 29, 1972 Palin wrote, “Maybe we cannot win, but I feel it is as important as anything not to lie down and accept this censorship” (2006, p. 88). The members of Monty Python did not win, and when “The All-England Summarize Proust Competition” aired on November 16, 1972, the words “and masturbating” were removed from Chapman’s line in the opening sketch.

The episode opens with the finals of the “All-England Summarize Proust” competition where the three semi-finalists are prepared to do their best to summarize Marcel Proust’s seven volume piece of work that took the French novelist fourteen years to complete in only fifteen seconds. Each contestant must give a complete – yet brief – summary “once in a swimsuit and once in an evening dress.” Prepared to judge this difficult event is a panel of cardboard cut-outs, mostly of former cricket players. As the master of ceremony, a flashy character named Arthur Mee, Jones does not feel that any of the three finalists – Harry, Chapman’s character who can express his fondness for golf and strangling animals, but not other activities, Ronald, Palin’s over-eager nerve-ridden character, and the Bolton Choral Society, who tried to put the seven volumes of A La Recherche du Temps Perdu into a harmony and as a result did not reach page one by the time the fifteen second expired – are worthy of the championship. As a result, Mee decides, “I’m going to award the first prize this evening to the girl with the biggest tits.” Flying Circus used shock throughout the series in order to generate humor through incongruity.

As the woman who had just run on stage accepts the trophy, the ending credits roll across the screen. By the third season, it was no longer enough to abandon sketches without a punch-line, Monty Python had begun to play with the structure of the television show. Upon letting the ending credits roll as though it were the end of the episode, not the very beginning, the episode cuts abruptly to an image of Mount Everest to introduce the “Everest Climbed by Hairdressers” sketch. First, there is a quick link back to the dialogue of from the end of the “Summarize Proust Competition” sketch in order to
connect the seemingly different content for a continuous episode that flows. As a voice over, Palin says, “Mount Everest. Forbidding. Aloof. Terrifying. The mountain with the biggest tits in the world.” The members of Monty Python used certain phrases and words numerous times in a single thirty-minute program. This provides continuity among a series of sketches and images that are all so absurd and fantastic.

The structure of a generic television episode was altered in *Flying Circus*. Sketches, captions, and voice-overs would at time be ordered to start over at the beginning, in addition to the times when they would be abandoned only a few lines in. In a documentary about Mount Everest – the genre established by Palin’s voice being heard over a still image of the famous mountain – a person cannot describe Everest the way Palin had. For that reason, a second voice – one belonging to Idle – says, “Start again.” Next, Gilliam in unpleasant make up leans into shot and waves before disappearing. In *Flying Circus*, Monty Python established several characters that would continuously reappear in an episode, sometimes with no lines at all. The role that these characters do fulfill is the creation of incongruity and an illogical narrative.

Palin takes the cue and begins to narrate once again, this time omitting the phrase that resulted in Idle’s interruption. Palin says, “Mount Everest. Forbidding. Aloof. Terrifying. This year this remote Himalayan mountain, this mystical temple, surrounded by the most difficult terrain in the world repulsed yet another attempt to conquer it.” Audience expectations are set to witness on their television a tale of weary, yet brave travelers. However, while Tensing and Sir Edmund Hillary are mentioned briefly at the end of the sketch, this particular climb of Mount Everest is not done by the rugged, brave, expected members of society. Rather, the sketch reveals that the brave men in this case are none other than “the International Hairdressers’ Expedition.”
Palin’s narrative voice-over wonders, “What was the real cause of the disharmony which destroyed their chances of success?” Meanwhile, none of the responses are in any manner related to climbing a mountain:

**First Climber (Palin):** Well, people would keep taking my hairdryer and never returning it.

**Second Climber (Chapman):** There was a lot of bitching in the tents.

**Third Climber (Idle):** You couldn’t get near a mirror.

“The All-England Summarize Proust Competition” presents a twisted and distorted view of mountain-climbing. When things got bad for the hairdressers, they needed to use “the last of the oxygen equipment just to keep the dryers going.” When a wide shot of Mount Everest with fourteen different paths indicate that a total of fourteen groups – at least one of whom was using repetition to motivate laughter by singing the Marcel Proust song from the opening sketch – were hoping to find the best trail in order to reach the top first. Ricky – played by Palin, and the leader of the hairdressers’ expedition – had to make a quick decision. And therefore, he “decided to open a salon” halfway up Mount Everest.

This decision was a success, and the members of Monty Python were able to use filming styles in order to transition to the next sketch. Ricky’s salon became a cinema advertisement. The shift from documentary to advertisement was quick. It was made possible by using still photos and Eric Idle’s voice, acting as the salesperson. Idle says, “Challenging Everest? Why not drop in a Ricky Pules’ – only 24,000 feet from this cinema. Ricky and Maurice offer a variety of styles for the well-groomed climber. Like Sherpa Tensing and Sir Edmund Hillary, be number one on top when you’re Number One on Top.” The voice over not only mimics the style and tone used in advertisements, but it sets the audience up to transition to Gilliam’s animation.

Everest is positioned in relation to a “cinema” in Idle’s monologue. Monty Python needs the audience to have an awareness of cinematic styles. In Gilliam’s animation, the format takes on a story
of romance. Cut outs – one male, one female – are embracing one another and expressing the passionate devotion that exists between the two of them. However, the humor in *Flying Circus* was used to violate expectations, especially those expectations that were brought on by film and television generic conventions. In the animation, the lines lead up to a romantic ending. However, just when the cinema-savvy audience would expect a kiss, the animation takes a turn toward the absurd and the cutout of the woman whips on goofy Groucho-Marx-style glasses, complete with a false nose.

For the audience, the gag is humorous because it violates generic expectations through the burlesque nature of a romance scene quickly utilizing clownish humor. What makes Monty Python humor strong is that the comedy troupe takes moments beyond just funny. Several of their sketches were successful – and remain that way – because the members of Monty Python continued sketches – and animations – beyond the initial gag. The form of a sketch no longer had a generic beginning, middle, and end. In the animation, the two cut-outs continue their appearance in the episode by appearing juxtaposed against different genres. However, the dialogue and interaction between the two animated characters are unchanged. The lines are identical, as is the use of the goofy glasses. In other words, now the humor in the animation lies in positioning romantic dialogue against a backdrop of first adventure then suspense/thriller genres. Gilliam accomplished this technique by overlaying other images. The cutouts express their devotion to one another while parachuting soldiers drop in, and then again in pitch black. The violation of expectations is no longer lying in the goofy classes that are out of place in the context of the scene, but rather the fact that the animated people themselves are now the ones out of place in recognizable cinematic genres.

In *Flying Circus*, animation led right into the sketches. When a phone rings during the acting of the suspense scene, the episode cuts to Terry Jones as Mrs. Little who asks, “Hello, is this the fire brigade?” into the telephone. Following a brief scene featuring the evasive firemen who respond with “No” and take the phone off the hook, the “Dying Hamster” sketch begins. Within the sketch, the
characters play out repetition and absurdity – often with an unheard telephone operator who continues the bizarre inquiry throughout the remainder of the episode.

Beginning with incongruity, Mervyn wants his mother to keep the beloved hamster alive by playing classical music on the cello. Jones tries to explain that cello music will not help, however the explanation is to no avail:

Mrs. Little (Jones): Oh, it doesn’t do any good, dear.

Mervyn (Cleese): Look. Do you want the little hamster to live or not?

Mrs. Little: Yes I do, Mervyn.

Mervyn: Well go and play the cello.

Cello playing has never been proven to keep someone alive, least of all a hamster. The audience is aware of this obvious fact, yet Cleese’s strongly held opinion on the subject is so absurd that it is humorous. In the end, the hamster died because even if “the whole Philharmonic Orchestra [was] in there, he’d [the hamster] still have gone.”

Knowing the reason – a dying hamster – why Cleese and Jones wanted the fire brigade in the first place creates an absurd relationship between authority figures and society. In the sketch, Jones and Cleese deliver most of their lines into the phone to an operator. Although the operator does not have a voice in the episode, the interaction characters have with the operator is responsible for some of the most absurd humor in “The All-England Summarize Proust Competition.” While on the phone with the operator, Cleese is trying to get a hold of the fire brigade, but his communication consists almost entirely of repeating the word “yes” like a broken record. The pattern is briefly interrupted with incongruity. In the middle of a series of yeses, Cleese removes his shoe and tells the operator, “Size eight” without a logical explanation given for this action, or as to why the operator had requested such information. Instead, Cleese returns to the inflectionless repetition of the word, “yes.”
The unseen and unheard telephone operator maintains a keen interest in the bizarre. While on the telephone, Jones’ character shares that she wears a size three. Later, when Chapman as Eamonn, the other son, who happens to be in full African war paint and walks in the door carrying a spear and a sword, the phone rings, and Cleese’s character answers with several yeses and then sharing that Chapman’s character wears a size seven shoe.

The sketch uses repetition that downplays the hint of social commentary. While the diary Michael Palin kept during the 1970s writes of the brutality between Britain and the Republic of Ireland, the mention of Irish riots in *Flying Circus* is overshadowed by using repetition to motivate humor:

Eamonn: Mummy.

Mrs. Little: Eamonn. Mervyn! Look it’s our Eamonn – oh let me look at you, tell me how…how is Dublin?

Eamonn: Well, things is pretty bad there at the moment, but there does seem some hope of a constitutional settlement.

Mrs. Little: Oh don’t talk. Let me just look at you. […] Mervyn, Mervyn – look who’s here, it’s our Eamonn come back to see us.

*Mervyn appears. He still looks shattered by the death of the hamster.*

Mervyn: Hello, Eamonn.

Eamonn: Hello, Merv.

Mervyn: How was Dublin?

Eamonn: Well as I was telling mummy here, things is pretty bad there at the moment, but there does seem some hope of a constitutional settlement.

Even when the fire brigade arrives days later in the living room, Mervyn is sitting on the couch looking depressed while Mrs. Little offers each of the firemen that came through a window a glass of
brandy, the firemen – all happy to be “called out to these little parties [because they are] much better than fires” – ask Chapman’s character how Dublin was. The answer is word-for-word identical to what Chapman had been saying earlier in the scene. Also in repetition, about half of the firemen are on the phone with the same operator checking shoe sizes.

The transition to the next sketch is accomplished by Jones facing the camera and offering a promotional introduction to a fictitious day-time television show. To the camera – and the audience – Jones says, “You know I used to dread parties until I watched ‘Party Hints by Veronica.’ I think it’s on now.” The camera cuts to the setting of a kitchen, where Idle – in drag – is grinning happily at the camera. Once again as a “naughty spinster” (Life of Python, 1999), Idle introduces a woman’s television show that initially seems to be centered around hosting parties before turning absurd:

Last week on “Party Hints” I showed you how to make a small plate of goulash go round twenty-six people, how to get the best out of your canapés, and how to unblock your loo. This week I’m going to tell you what to do if there is an armed communist uprising near your home when you’re throwing a party. […] So the thing to do is get some cloth and some bits of old paper, put it down on the floor and shoot everybody. This will deal with the Red Menace on your own doorstep. If you’re having canapés, as I showed you last week, or an outdoor barbecue, then the thing to do is set fire to all houses in the street. This will stir up anti-communist hatred and your neighbors will be right with you as you organize counter-revolutionary terror. So you see, if you act promptly enough, any left-wing uprising can be dealt with by the end of the party.

Although politically, Great Britain is a socialist nation, as they had been since the end of World War II, socialist reform was not the socialism of Karl Marx. Britain did not experience the Red Scare to the extremities as the United States. However, it was wildly out of place to have a woman sitting at a
television studio designed to look like a kitchen giving tips to any potential hostess who might encounter a communist uprising.

Communism is a theme in the animation that follows the sketch. The one dozen communist revolutions in the animation connected “Party Hints” to the “Language Laboratory” sketch. Using Gilliam’s fondness for animated violence, the cartoon has an anti-climatic lead into “Language Laboratory.” The connection can be seen with the image of Idle sitting in a booth in a pair of headphones yelling, “Bleck people. Bleck people. Rrrhodesian. Kill the blecks. Rrrhodesian. Smith. Smith. Kill the blecks within the five principles,” into a tape recorder.

Unlike a more typical language laboratory that has a line of individuals reciting foreign languages, the episode is meant to train consumers of these tapes to fulfill social roles. These social roles range from the politician tape that says, “I’m afraid I cannot comment on that until it’s been officially hushed up” to the likes of Welsh activist in the trade union movement, Clive Jenkins. This sketch suggest that each situation and personality has a certain script, and whether it is political activism or being the “life of a party,” the dialogue is unoriginal, conventional, and overused. The majority of this sketch is humorous because the audience can recognize these communication scripts. It is only at the end when the line of tape operators begin to sing that the expected script is broken. When the line begins to once again sing the Marcel Proust song, repetition is not only used in the song, but also in the sound of a gong with Idle’s voice once again saying, “Start again.”

The camera shows an image of Mount Everest. Once again, it is Palin’s voice that says, “Mount Everest. Forbidding. Aloof. Terrifying. The highest place on earth.” The audience might expect another group of unconventional climbers to be climbing the mountain meaning Idle’s request to “start again” has brought the episode back to its beginning. However, Flying Circus even violates its own style. The camera pulls back to reveal that the image of Mount Everest is a framed picture on a wall, and Palin – who is sitting at a desk on the telephone – is in fact not a voice-over but had only
been out of shot. To establish himself as a travel agent, Palin adds into the telephone, “No, I’m sorry we don’t go there. No.” As the scene is taking place at a travel agency, the audience might expect a tourist to walk in; however, they would never be able to expect what Idle, who Chapman called a “word freak” (as cited in Wilmut, 1980, p. 219), does as this tourist:

**Tourist:** My name is Smoke-Too-Much.

**Bounder (Palin):** What?

**Tourist:** My name is Smoke-Too-Much. Mr. Smoke-Too-Much.

**Bounder:** Well, you better cut down a bit then.

**Tourist:** What?

**Bounder:** You better cut down a bit then.

**Tourist:** Oh I see! Cut down a bit, for Smoke-Too-Much.

**Bounder:** Yes, ha ha…I expect you get people making jokes about your name all the time, eh?

**Tourist:** No, no actually. It never struck me before. Smoke…too…much!

**Bounder:** Anyway, you’re interested in one of our adventure holidays, eh?

This would be the first time Palin’s character would attempt to get Idle’s to focus on the real nature of his visit to the travel agency now that the commentary on his strange name had been made. However, what Palin’s character learns is that Idle has a language deficiency that he tries to correct, only to the result of great confusion. Smoke-Too-Much reported that he had seen the agency’s advertisement in the “bolour supplement.” Due to a trauma suffered as a “sboolboy,” Idle’s character cannot pronounce the letter “C.” Following Palin’s recommendation to use the letter “K” when he comes across a word with the letter “C,” Idle’s character achieves a sense of freedom, much to the chagrin of Palin’s character.
At twenty-two minutes and forty-six seconds into “The All-England Summarize Proust Competition,” Idle begins to talk, happy that he can now pronounce all words correctly. In fact, Mr. Smoke-Too-Much can at last share all his thoughts on sunscreen, cuisine, and tourists that he finds annoying. Ironic though, is that now that Smoke-Too-Much has begun to talk and ignore Bounder’s fed up cries of “Shut up,” Bounder finds him to be the obnoxious tourist. It is over three minutes later that the audience can finally no longer hear Idle’s ranting because as the Receptionist, Carol Cleveland had directed the camera down a corridor into a television studio for a show that promises “a quite controversial look at the world around us.”

Prepared to stir up controversy, Anne Elk – played by John Cleese, in drag – has proposed “a new theory about the brontosaurus.” However, while Mr. Smoke-Too-Much did not want to stop speaking, Anne Elk is equally unsure about how to have a conversation with another person because she does not speak when she is expected to:

**Chris (Chapman):** What is it?

**Anne Elk:** Where? *(Looks around)*

**Chris:** No, no your new theory.

**Anne Elk:** Oh, what is my theory that it is. Well Chris you may well ask me what is my theory.

**Chris:** I am asking.

**Anne Elk:** Good for you. My word yes. Well Chris, what is it that it is – this theory of mine. Well, this is what it is – my theory that I have, that is to say, which is mine, is mine.

**Chris (beginning to show signs of exasperation):** Yes, I know it’s yours, what is it?

**Anne Elk:** Where? Oh, what is my theory?

Once Cleese’s character has spent eighteen seconds coughing and clearing her throat, she states her new theory about the brontosaurus. Anne Elk’s controversial theory states, “All brontosaurus are
thin at one end, much, much thicker in the middle, and then thin again at the far end.” Most absurd is
that while Chapman’s character – bewildered about what he had to suffer through to hear – told
Cleese’s character, “Well, er, this theory of yours appears to have hit the nail on the head,” Anne Elk
wholeheartedly believed that her theory would bring great enlightenment to the general viewing
public.

As Cleese’s character tries to share a second theory, the theme of the bizarre operator
returned. While Anne Elk speaks – or coughs – Chapman’s character answers the ringing phone,
removes his shoe declared that he was wearing a size eight-and-a-half shoe. Next, Chapman rises to
his feet and walks down the same corridor where Idle’s voice can be heard again, leaving the audience
to assume that his character never did stop talking. By cutting between two different sketches, the
*Flying Circus* does not conclude either sketch. When Cleese’s character follows Chapman into the
other room the second theory, “Fire brigade choirs seldom sing songs about Marcel Proust,” the
episode concludes with repetition of themes and dialogue. Because the ending credits had come at the
beginning of the episode following the first sketch, “The All-England Summarize Proust
Competition” cuts away quickly from the Marcel Proust song with the sound of Idle’s voice saying,
“Start again” one last time, and then cutting to a black screen to conclude the episode without showing
credits at the end of the thirty minutes.

These seven episodes all present a style of absurd humor that violates expectations both of the
sketch comedy genre itself, and also of logical situations. Repetition and de-familiarization are both
used by the members of the comedy troupe in order to maintain a style that is as unique of each of the
members themselves. *Flying Circus* used several micro-elements (animations, repetition,
interruptions, etc.) within these seven episodes that produced a uniquely-Python interpretation as the
function of humor as absurdity and the violation of generic expectations.
Chapter Four: Conclusion

In answering the first research question - *To what extent does Flying Circus violate generic expectations of sketch comedy?* – this study has addressed the violation of generic expectations in the seven episodes analyzed. The study found that *Flying Circus* not only abandoned the use of the punch-line, but adjustments were made to sketches by the members of Monty Python in order to violate conventions. For example, Neale (2001c) noted that sketches took place in one setting in generic sketch comedy, yet in *Flying Circus*, some sketches (e.g., “The Parrot Sketch” and “Mr. Hitler”) take place in multiple locales and settings. In addition, sketches like the “The Parrot Sketch” in “Full Frontal Nudity” had multiple lines that in a more conventional sketch comedy program would indicate the end of the sketch, and instead, the sketch carried on, and only ended when the Colonel – a recurring character – charged in the shot later on. In addition, other sketches, such as “Doctor Darling” in “Archaeology Today” and “Scared Soldier” in “Full Frontal Nudity” were abandoned, either by the use of captions (“Doctor Darling”) or one character declaring the sketch to be over (“Scared Soldier”). While *Flying Circus* matched other generic expectations by mixing filmed segments with material performed in a studio with an audience present, the use of television comedy’s conventions – the black-out, the canned applause, flash-back filming techniques – were used only to criticize their conventions, most often for being too artificial.

In answering the second research question - *To what extent is absurdity used to satirize or mock symbols of authority and Britishness in Flying Circus?* – this study found that *Flying Circus* mocked authority figures by causing them to seem like incompetent lunatics or serious to the point of being extreme. Through using absurdist humor to satirize, or attack authority through ridicule, instead of expressing anger by explicit attacks made against a topical political economy, *Flying Circus’* satire was established through absurdity. *Flying Circus* satirizes authority figures
by presenting characters that are not deserving of the power or authority they have. The army
Major in “Spam” is cowardly and manipulative. Inspector Muffin in “How to Recognize
Different Parts of the Body” is incompetent. Chapman’s Colonel spends the entire length of “Full
Frontal Nudity” interrupting sketches and adamantly yelling at people any time anyone gets
“silly.” In Flying Circus authority is filtered through the minds of six men that highly resent the
taking of oneself too seriously and exercising authority badly as a result.

In answering the third, multi-part research question - *To what extent does television as a
medium motivate the form of humor in Flying Circus?* and *To what extent do micro-elements and
editing techniques used in Flying Circus present a unique interpretation of the communication of
humor as the violation of expectations?* – this study found that while the members of Monty
Python have performed in other media, and in live performances, *Flying Circus* is successful on
television because the series draws a lot of its humor from the violation of generic expectations of
television programs. The Sunday night timeslot during the first season was not ideal in terms of
general audience, but *Flying Circus* benefited from a college audience (Lennon, 2009, p. 50).
Since the comedy troupe was among the belief that “the best parodies of television are done on
television” (Cleese: as cited in Wilmut, 1980, p. 202), the medium motivates several of the
conventions that *Flying Circus* violated. Palin as the television presenter in “The Naked Ant” is
an explicit commentary on the norms and practices of television. In addition, Cleese as Praline
has a short dialogue with Jones in “Full Frontal Nudity” that is a criticism of the medium’s
conventions and expectations. In answering the second part of the third research question, this
study found that *Flying Circus* used a stream-of-consciousness in their transitions. In other words,
by examining specific micro-elements of each of the episodes, this study cites specific techniques
that were used in the series as a way to violate generic expectations. *Flying Circus* abandoned or
interrupted sketches, transitioned back-and-forth between animation and live action, and even

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changed opening and ending credits to unsettle and violate the expectations of devoted fans of the series (see Table 4).

### Table 4: Use of Micro-Elements

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<th>Animation</th>
<th>Interrupting Or Abandoning sketches</th>
<th>Repetition</th>
<th>Altering Credits and Structure</th>
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<td>Full Frontal Nudity</td>
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<td>Archaeology Today</td>
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<td>The Money Programme</td>
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<td>The All-England Summarize Proust Competition</td>
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Micro-elements used in *Flying Circus* are uniquely Python. Although Jones said that since “Pythonesque” can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary, the series failed to violate conventions (*Monty Python Live in Aspen*, 1998), programming executive for the BBC, Barry Took, felt differently about the impact of each of the micro-elements of the series. He said, “My biggest error, […] was that I said, ‘Python will not be a major success, but it will be very influential.’ And I was utterly wrong because it wasn’t influential at all – nobody copied it – and it was enormously successful” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 315). Other comics and sketch comedy produces – such as Lorne Michaels, who went on to create *Saturday Night Live* in 1975 – admitted to enjoying *Flying Circus* [Palin and Idle were even both asked to host *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970s (Palin, 2006)], and yet the style of *Flying Circus* was not replicated. The form of the series is unique. As a result, this study found that each element that goes into the creation of a single thirty-minute episode of *Flying Circus* represents a style of humor through the violation of expectations.

Finally, in answering the fourth research question - *To what extent is Flying Circus able to transcend time and culture?* – this study found that even culturally-specific content can be
enjoyed without a strong cultural knowledge because an audience member might still be successful in detecting humorous tones. In other words, British humor – distinguished by Graham Chapman (2006a) under the notion that the British are dry and witty, while Americans are funny and lighter – is not fundamentally cultural: people outside of Britain can have a strong appreciation for British humor. Because the overall content of Flying Circus is not topical humor, and instead an absurdist representation, the series continues to build a devoted audience through syndication.

Although Graham Chapman died on October 4, 1989, new audiences are discovering the work of Monty Python each year. Since the death of Chapman, the surviving members have appeared in documentaries and talk shows – often times alongside cardboard cut-outs and fake urns to represent the deceased Chapman (Monty Python Live in Aspen, 1998). With over thirty years passing since the first performance of “The Lumberjack Song” Michael Palin’s declaration of “I didn’t want to do this. I wanted to be a lumberjack” has been met with thunderous applause at both the Concert for George Harrison (2002) and Not the Messiah (2009). Audiences have never stopped enjoying Flying Circus sketches. Years later, these sketches are still immensely funny. Cleese said that they [the members of Monty Python] “were playing games with convention” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 314).

Nancy Lewis – who worked closely with Monty Python as their U.S. manager “who almost single-handedly fought to get Python accepted in America” (Palin, 2006, p. xv) – spoke to the uniqueness of Flying Circus as a sketch comedy in Monty Python Speaks! She said, “It was so exciting, because it was comparatively revolutionary what Python did. […] It was never repeated, strangely. People tend to go back to blackouts at the end of sketches again. […] Very little of general Python has been tried [to be done today]” (as cited in Morgan, 1999, p. 315).
One of the most significant reasons why *Flying Circus* continues to appeal to audiences is because the sketches stick with them. Television genres are dynamic to reflect the dynamic nature of our lives and culture itself. Perhaps one of the reasons why *Flying Circus* is different than *TW3* is because the political climate in Britain was different. The members of Monty Python were not resisting a political party. The issues *Flying Circus* did mock were not strictly topical. Instead of mocking specific people or issues, *Flying Circus* largely presented issues with authority and symbols that still exist today. The wit of Monty Python is focused on those who are seen as “too serious.” Therefore, episodes of *Flying Circus* have the ability to grow funnier with each viewing. Wilmut wrote, “It seems to be a characteristic of Python sketches that they do not make their greatest impact at first, but lie in the subconscious like a time-bomb” (1980, p. 207). In other words, *Flying Circus* sketches are bizarre, but the appeal does not have an expiration date. In fact, Wilmut believed that episodes of *Flying Circus* would linger in the mind of the audience for a period of time before the deeper levels of humor would become apparent.

Broader implications can be derived from this study. First, *Flying Circus* used absurdity by having characters behave senselessly and violating audience expectations to generate laughter. Since comedy cannot exist without laughter (Neale & Krutnik, 1990), *Flying Circus* episodes manipulate the generic form of television sketch comedy in order to unsettle conventions. Among the seven episodes selected for analysis in this study, *Flying Circus* often established one narrative and then would completely violate it: sometimes through abandonment or interruption, and other times by frantically increasing the absurdity.

Second, generic analysis of *Flying Circus* revisit Mittell’s (2001, pp. 16-18) five core practices defined in chapter one (pp. 13-14). This study navigates between specificity and generality as Mittell felt that generic studies should do. Future research on *Flying Circus* can examine episodes as a whole in order to evaluate the sketch within a larger context. Also included
in these core elements is the inclusion of particular characteristics of the medium and an examination of power relations as a component of social contexts. Within the analysis are descriptions of social commentary that conclude that *Flying Circus* works as a television series to document and promote absurdity in a too-conventional world. If examining *Flying Circus* as part of a cultural hierarchy, the series comments on both universal conventions and ridicule or mockery of establishment, where authority is badly exercised and often too constrained by social norms. Future research might explore a larger percentage of the forty-five episodes that made up the series. In addition, future research might examine the difference made over time and compare the first three seasons with the last season (episode thirty-nine through episode forty-five) in terms of differences that occurred after Cleese left the series.

**Limitations**

There are multiple limitations to this study. First, of all the products – television shows, feature films, broadways musicals – bearing the Monty Python moniker, I have only selected the *Flying Circus* television program. My scope includes only seven episodes out of forty-five. In addition, the finding in this study are specific only to the episodes analyzed. I have only selected programs from the first three seasons because I wanted to keep to a data pool of episodes that include all six members of the Monty Python troupe. Second, researcher bias is a limitation in this study. The seven episodes I have selected for study are subject of my own choosing. In other words, while they do feature sketches that continue to get a high number of YouTube hits, they also reflect my own personal selection. Third, mentions made in this study to audiences and audience expectations are contrived from a general audience. Comments about audience expectations and laughter are formed through a hypothetical audience that stems from the studio audience present during the filming of the episodes.
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Selected Filmography

Almost the Truth: The Lawyer’s Cut (2009)

Graham Chapman’s Personal Best (2005)

Life of Python (1999)

Monty Python’s Flying Circus (1969-1974)
Monty Python Live in Aspen (1998)

Parrot Sketch Not Included: Twenty Years of Python (1989)