

A Theory of the Gag: Comedic Mechanisms in Exploitation Film Form

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In *The Corpse Grinders* (Ted V. Mikels, 1971), the nefarious owners of the Lotus Cat Food Company discuss their struggles over a lack of fresh ingredients. One of them, Landau, summons an employee, Willy, to the office with the implication that Willy will become the missing ingredient necessary to keep production going. Gripping the employee around the neck and shoulders in a gesture of false intimacy, Landau asks if he would finally like to see “the back room,” a space that Willy has previously been admonished for entering. As Willy and Landau continue their conversation, shock cuts to the “back room” are interspersed between the two men talking. These split-second inserts are jarring and abrupt, but they comedically augment the conversation about the employee’s new vocation in the back room and what actually occurs there, which is the titular corpse grinding. The blunt inserts of a meat grinder churning out minced matter with a bright red filter are moments of comedy in an exploitation film, playing with the simultaneous separation and conjoining of distinct and seemingly irreconcilable realities as a comedic procedure. But Ted V. Mikels’ shock cuts to the backroom are far from the only such comedic moments in exploitation films. Many exploitation directors, such as Mikels, Herschell Gordon Lewis, Frank Henenlotter, Russ Meyer, Doris Wishman, and John Waters, use comedy not just as a way of playing with or distracting from low budget aesthetics but as an intrinsic part of their films’ formal composition. These films do not provoke laughter simply because of their material paucity and technical ineptitude; rather, their directors, aware of the material limitations that comes with a lack of finance, deliberately employ a comedic mode that works through horrific and gross-out images.

In what follows, I advance a theory of the gag in low budget exploitation horror films that attends to the intersections of horror and disgust in relation to comedy, arguing that these gags operate through a complication of comedy’s incongruity thesis, which posits that comedy emerges through the juxtaposition

of incongruous elements or a surprising revelation.¹ Working through Alenka Zupančič's approach to comedy's processes as a short circuit between heterogeneous orders that illuminates their connection via the very gap between them, I argue that there is more at stake than just the incongruous thwarting of expectation (Zupančič 2008, 6). This particular concept of the gag develops from its position in comedy more generally as a self-contained unit of entertainment that arrests the spectator's attention and disrupts the forward trajectory of narrative, culminating in a punchline or visual joke that is accompanied by an uproarious burst of laughter. The gags I am examining here also have this capacity to interrupt narrative with outlandish spectacles, but the term "gag" has other meanings, meanings that I pursue in relation to moments of comedy in exploitation films. The term "gag" has its etymological roots in the sound made when choking, an onomatopoeic origin that has developed to mean to either choke or retch, and obsolete meanings include allusions to violence, as "gag" once referred to dealing a sharp blow to or wounding of another.² Intertwining these meanings of the "gag" in relation to its use in comedy to refer to a self-contained humorous situation or joke, I argue for taking seriously the potential for exploitation films that use revolting or horrific imagery to employ mechanisms that become comedic precisely through form rather than content.

Outlining two different kinds of gags, the horrific gag and the gross-out gag, I examine how the experience of laughter in exploitation cinema is dependent on and produced by the form of material images of rupture and transgression on screen. Exploitation films traffic in the sensational and scandalous, and in its classical period (1919-1959), as defined by Eric Schaefer, they lured their audiences through promises of salacious subject matter unavailable in mainstream cinema, even if they rarely come through on their promises of violence and titillation thanks to local censorship. Made cheaply and independently, exploitation films present "topics that censorship bodies and the organized industry's self-regulatory mechanisms prohibited," bringing to the screen "forbidden spectacles" (Schaefer 1999, 2). The films I discuss as exploitation came after the classical period had ended, when exploitation films

¹ For examples of the incongruity thesis of comedy in philosophy, see Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000), 223; and James Beattie, *Essays: On Poetry and Music, As They Affect the Mind; On Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition; On the Usefulness of Classical Learning* (London: Printed for E. and C. Dilly, In The Poultry; And W. Creech, Edinburgh, 1779), 320, 321.

² See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "gag (v.1)" and "gag (v.2)" (source: *OED Online*, URLs in References list).

were largely able to fulfill their pledge to expose the audience to sensational sights of sex and depravity, although they still share many of the hallmarks of the classical exploitation film, particularly low budget aesthetics. I am using the term “exploitation,” then, in what has come to be its more vernacular sense, in that these films exploited a particular subject matter and presented it in a sensationalist way, whether it’s the horror of pulverized and dismembered bodies or the revulsion of ingesting invertebrates and feces. While exploitation has always foregrounded its sensationalist aspects, what is less obvious is how a later generation of filmmakers working in an exploitation style also employ comedy as a deliberate strategy of additional pleasure. My approach is not concerned with *why* viewers laugh at such horrific and revolting imagery in terms that are specifically content-motivated. This theory of the gag offers an elaboration of the pleasures of transgressive texts by examining comedy as formal mechanism inherent in the shocking image and its construction.

Horror Comedy, and the Comedy of Horror

Horror and comedy are curious bedfellows in that they seek out the elicitation of divergent affective responses, as laughter is a “release” and entails an outward expansion of the body, while horror is constricting and elicits “feelings of pressure, heaviness, and claustrophobia” (Carroll 1999, 145). And yet these affective responses, bodily and visceral, have much in common. The involuntary shriek of terror at a jump scare or burst of laughter at a pratfall both seize the body immediately with vocal and corporeal discharges. Noel Carroll also illuminates how theories of comedy and horror often overlap, such as Freud’s contention that both jokes and the uncanny summon the repressed, while Jenstch’s unsettling automaton parallels Henri’s Bergson’s humorous human become mechanical (Carroll 1999, 146). Carroll is invested specifically in texts that are a confluence of horror and comedy, such as *Beetlejuice* (Tim Burton, 1988), and he reads comedy’s incongruity thesis as productive for thinking through its relationship with horror, because it involves the transgression of norms, subverts expectations, and disrupts usual categorizations (Carroll 1999, 154). It is through this disturbance that Carroll locates horror’s affinity with comedy, as horror is also invested, albeit with different objects, in the upsetting of strict demarcations and ideas of impurity and contamination (Carroll 1999, 154). When introduced to one another in a melding of genres, questions surrounding this confluence tend to focus on what each mode brings to the other: does comedy temper the existential threat of horror? Do we laugh to

alleviate our fears? Do violent and transgressive images invite a more intense hilarity because laughter offers a release?³ Such an approach is touched upon by Philip Brophy, who coined the term “horrorality” to account for how contemporary horror films in the late 1970s and 1980s explored ideas of “horror, textuality, morality, hilarity” (Brophy 1986, 3). The deliberate comedy of a film such as *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1982) is acknowledged as a crucial component of this era of horror, “especially if used as an undercutting agent to counter-balance its more horrific moments” (Brophy 1986, 12). Laughter is evoked as a mitigation strategy in a new kind of horror film that pummels its audience with violence and frights rather than thinking through how the film creates comedy formally.

While attention has been paid to horror and comedy as complementary modes, transgressive exploitation films are rarely discussed in terms of the humour that they produce, despite being replete with gags that both disgust and amuse. Perhaps this oversight is due to the additional questions that exploitation horror films raise about perceived superiority over a text that is assumed to be failing in its attempts at levity and fright. The exploitation film that acquires cult status might be read through the lens of Jeffrey Sconce’s paracinema, a reading strategy that entails a reverse elitism through the valorisation of films that are technically “bad,” with an ironic distance afforded by the spectator’s cultural capital (Sconce 1994, 382). Reflecting on how economies of cultural capital influenced this earlier study of the “paracinematic,” Sconce acknowledges that what is missing from the paracinematic approach are the “issues of pleasure, affect, and even obsession that attend a sincere passion for deviant cinema” (Sconce 2007, 8). In her study of alternative film cultures and their dissemination via VHS catalogues, Joan Hawkins also addresses the importance of affect. She argues, following Sconce, that the “operative criterion here is *affect*: the ability of a film to thrill, frighten, gross out, arouse, or otherwise directly engage the spectator’s body” (Hawkins 2000, 4). This emphasis on affect as well as the “desire [...] to see something ‘different’, something unlike contemporary Hollywood cinema” is the commonality between the highbrow art films and the lowbrow trash films that are indiscriminately catalogued alongside one another in catalogues such *Sinister Sinema* and *Psychotronic Video* (Hawkins 2000, 7). Yet the function of laughter specifically as a pleasurable affective response, particularly in a subset of transgressive cult films that deliberately use humour

³ Such questions are important and are explored more fully in Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper’s edited collection, *The Laughing Dead: The Horror-Comedy Film from Bride of Frankenstein to Zombieland* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

within the texts, is still notably absent from cult and exploitation film scholarship.

Sconce's important work on the paracinematic was based on research into the content of fanzines and magazines such as *Psychotronic Video*, *Zontar*, and *Trashola* that specialized in elevating cultural detritus that shared no particular aesthetic or generic filiations beyond being neglected or outright disavowed by both mainstream and highbrow tastemakers. But the role of humour in a number of these texts is also overlooked, as evidenced by *Psychotronic Video*'s Michael J. Weldon's complaint in the foreword to the *Psychotronic Video Guide*—an encyclopedia of texts Weldon labels “psychotronic”—that he is “tired of too many horror comedies,” instead noting the importance of “Unwatchable and boring junk” to the psychotronic canon (Weldon 1996, x). There seems to be a reticence amongst scholars and fans alike to indulge in exploitation's appeals to comedy. I would conjecture that for scholars, it raises the thorny question of why fans enjoy laughing at bodily disfigurement with such gusto, and for fans, it risks devaluing the transgressive potential of horror to have it associated with a generic mode more accustomed to light-hearted fun. In response to these questions, I think about the gag as a formal mechanism that is not only invested in the objects of laughter but rather in comedy's processes and operations, and I think through transgression as a comedic formal movement that operates at the limit between an element and its radical other. The gag slips between seemingly irreconcilable elements, such as life and death, the base and the ideal, causing a revolted laugh that does not condescend to its objects, but rather acknowledges the innovative formal operations produced despite material, technical, and financial constraints.

A Brief History of Gagging

The gag has a long history in cinematic comedy, of course, particularly in relation to early silent slapstick comedies, erupting as a spectacle that disrupts the narrative and halts it in its tracks. While scholar Donald Crafton outlines a dialectical antagonism between gag and narrative, or the pie and the chase, in silent slapstick comedy (Crafton 2006, 355-364), Henry Jenkins notes that gags in early sound comedy had more diverse functions, sometimes contributing to narrative motivation or encapsulating themes (Jenkins 1992, 102). For Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, the gag may offer a digression from the main narrative, but the gag itself often functions as a narratively contained unit; it must have a punchline, or an ending (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 43). Although

how I am conceiving of the gag in exploitation films is different to the traditional approach to the gag as a fundamental component of comedic writing and performance, some of these tenets are crucial to developing a theory of the gag as a joke *and* a retch. For instance, Henry Jenkins argues that “Integrated or not, narrativized or not [...] gags retain an affective force apart from those functions; gags remain a source of audience fascination that competes directly with plot and character development” (Jenkins 1992, 104). It is this “affective force” that forms the basis of the effect of the two kinds of gag that I discuss, the horrific gag and the gross-out gag. The gag in traditional forms of comedy is often seen as the excuse for a narrative that stitches comedic ruptures together, a formula that is apparent in many exploitation films that create inventive narrative structures upon which to build spectacles of violence and disgust.

But these spectacles are not simply horrific and revolting, as filmmakers often deliberately play with humour in the production of these extravagant displays of gore and gross-out. As Donald Crafton argues, “Gags provide the opposite of epistemological comprehension by the spectator. They are atemporal bursts of violence and/or hedonism that are as ephemeral and as gratifying as the sight of someone’s pie-smitten face” (Crafton 2006, 363). Crafton’s description is evocative of exploitation films’ gags as it attends to the excess that erupts with an immediacy that momentarily visualizes and destabilizes the separation between distinct and oppositional elements through the transgression across and between them. I am not particularly concerned with how these gags function as a disruption to or augmentation of the narrative; rather, I want to think through how they travesty dialectics through their play with the seemingly incompatible as a comedic mechanism. Thus, my focus is not on the relationship between the gag and narrative, or in solidifying once and for all the ongoing debate about what exactly a gag is and its purpose in relation to narrative, but rather to extend the term to account for the rupture of comedy in unexpected places. The horrific gag and the gross-out gag incorporate many traits of the slapstick gag, but they are predicated on a specific confrontation between disgusting and horrific matter and the pleasures of comedy. The gag is a moment of surprise, a collision between two heterogeneous elements or orders that both wrenches them apart and sutures them together. An element of the unknown is crucial for the operation of the horrific gag and the gross-out gag, as they do not construct their comedy through obvious forms of wit or humour, even if traces of such forms emerge in an investigation of their mechanisms.

The theory of the gag as a comedic mechanism of horror and gross-out in exploitation is informed by Alenka Zupančič’s argument that “comedy

thrives on all kinds of short circuits that establish an immediate connection between heterogeneous orders” (Zupančič 2008, 8). Zupančič reads the structure of comedy through the work of thinkers who are invested in dualities and dialectics, including Hegel, Henri Bergson, and Jacques Lacan. She demonstrates how the comic engages with the concrete and universal, the living and the mechanical, and the organic and the symbolic, in ways that tell us something about the relationship between the two elements as a figuration of one that holds both in an unresolved tension. For instance, she complicates Bergson’s thesis that comedy occurs when something “mechanical is encrusted on the living” (Bergson 1913, 37) by demonstrating how the mechanical is already an essential part of the living; when we behave automatically, we are perhaps most ourselves in “the inherent rigidity of our own ‘living personality’,” and the social conformity Bergson believes laughter seeks out is founded upon rigid social codes and their “mechanical uniformity” rather the fluidity of the living subject (Zupančič 2008, 117, 113). Instead of viewing mechanism and liveliness as mutually exclusive, Zupančič engages with these concepts through their “inner connections and mutual implications” that work through comedy’s play with dualities (Zupančič 2008, 122). Zupančič argues that “the first step of the comic is this splitting divergence of the One” while its second step “consists simply in the comedy playing and constructing, from that point on, with this duality in a specific way: showing us the inner connections and mutual implications of the two elements of the duality” (Zupančič 2008, 122). What is crucial to Zupančič’s claim is that comedy does not simply illuminate dualities, or demonstrate contradiction within something, but that it holds contradiction and the divergence between heterogeneous elements as the very constitution of the comic. The duality is not resolved, but rather comedy operates within the gap that both splits apart and conjoins disparate elements and plays with contradictory elements that are already inherent within one another.

The Horrific Gag

In her consideration of comedy’s mechanisms, Zupančič explores how comedy plays with dualities and oppositions at the very point of their paradoxical separation and conjunction, clarifying that “the immediacy that comedy thus puts forward is not that of a smooth imperceptible passing of one into another, but that of a material *cut* between them” (Zupančič 2008, 8). Film is a privileged medium for thinking through the gag that cuts between heterogeneous orders because of how editing is used to splice together radically incompatible elements

in a way that also cements the relationship between them. The impossible elements of a gag can also occur within a frame, which I will work through later in relation to the gross-out gag, but for now, the splice that both cuts and sutures is worth dwelling on. The perverse dialectic of the horrific gag operates through the spliced meat grinder frames inserted into the macabre conversation regarding replacement ingredients in *The Corpse Grinders*. The cross-cutting between the office conversation and the spliced meat grinder shots literalizes this material cut, a cut that in a very material way exposes the fundamental relationship between the two separate orders. The meat grinder shots are radically divorced from the unfolding narrative as a linear progression through space and time, but they also expose the dependence of the narrative upon the meat grinder as what occasions the unfolding horror. And yet the cut between these radically different spaces is also what sutures them together; the gag operates in this gap between the shots that reveals their inter-dependence upon one another.

There is a surface-level reading of these scenes that might attend to representation, particularly the representation of the simple-minded employee who is gullible and falls prey to Landau's grotesque machinations. If the viewer laughs at the employee, it might be argued that they have fallen into the trap of Henri Bergson's social corrective thesis, that laughter at absent-minded folks is designed to coerce conformity.⁴ In other words, if the viewer is laughing at the content of the scene, it is possible that they have aligned themselves with the villain and are laughing at the man too stupid to realize that he is agreeing to his own death because he is so accustomed to acquiescing to his employer's wishes. But the formal mechanism of the cut demonstrates an affinity with the operations of comedy as a mode that dabbles in the upsetting of structural norms, that plays with the relationship between oppositions in a way that reconfigures how they are perceived. The scene organizes the living subject and the dead object as distinct from one another, at the same time that the human being and the undifferentiated meat product are stitched together, demonstrating the fundamental inseparability of them from one another. The horrific gag often plays with this moment of rupture between a contained, living body and its sudden gory eruption through violence, a rupture between two opposed bodily states that come together in the brief shock cuts that disrupt linear temporality, that strike the spectator with the immediacy of comedy.

⁴ Bergson argues that "Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed." (In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, translated by Cloudesly Brereton and Fred Rothwell, New York: MacMillan, 1913, 197).

The detachment of the subject from its body is a recurring theme in comedy, as bodies behave in wayward ways that the subject seems unable to control, but in horror exploitation films, this detachment becomes actualized through imaginative death scenes. In short comedic gags, such as when a person falls flat on their face, Zupančič notes how the ego may detach from its “It,” from its body. While the body is normally viewed as a coherent coincidence between itself and the ego, when someone trips up, their “collected” comportment is disrupted until they find their feet again (Zupančič 2008, 65). The coherent body undergoes a “comical decomposition” of its unity, which “confronts us directly with the question of the (missing) link between the two sides of the same reality that thus become visible again in the same “shot”—they are visible until the person “collects” herself again. We could say that the comic short circuit is a manifestation of the missing link which, in the very fact that it is missing, holds a given reality together, whereas Unity functions as a veiling of the missing link” (Zupančič 2008, 65). What is quite striking in this passage is how closely it resonates with the practice of splicing and suturing images together in cinema, where the gap between frames constitutes the very relationship between them. Editing creates meaning by structuring relationships between different shots and scenes and is usually designed to be as seamless as possible, to create coherence through discontinuity. However, the shock cuts in *The Corpse Grinders* aim for a deliberate disjoint between the scenes in the office and the meat grinder, a disjoint that nevertheless operates through a fundamental implied relationship between the two spaces. The shock cuts operate through a cleavage in both senses of the word as that which joins and that which rends apart, and comedy is what emerges in the impossible gap between the images.

The horrific gag works through primarily imagistic means, which chimes with Neale and Krutnik’s loose definition of the comedic gag as a “non-linguistic comic action” (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 51). Even when language is used, it is the image that does the comedic labour of demonstrating that the words have a double meaning, that the first level of language’s signification should not be taken at face value. In *The Corpse Grinders*, spliced images of horrific acts and insinuations gesture towards the disjoint between word and image, between language and visual representation, as characters deploy words with more sinister meanings, which are revealed by the graphic inserts. For example, when Landau explains to his boss that they “won’t be needing Caleb anymore,” that “the world is full of ingredients,” the delivery of these sentences is punctuated with splices of Landau’s accomplice attacking and strangling Caleb to death. There is often a split between “eyes and words” in comedic procedures

for Zupančič, which not only demonstrates the divergence between what is heard and what is said, but in that deceptive words often betray a fundamental truth (Zupančič 2008, 81). The world is indeed full of cat food ingredients, if one is willing to commit murder to source them, as demonstrated by the sharp inserts of strangulation. The cut between the conversation in the present and Landau's imagination of the murder also demonstrates the missing link between two distinct orders of temporality and spatiality and their relationship to one another, the missing link as an impossibility that also wrenches together the objective perception of the scene and Landau's subjective musings on it as a formal comedic mechanism.

The play with the slippery boundary between life and death is present in comedy proper, and as Zupančič points out, is often read as a lighthearted coping strategy for the inevitable demise of the individual human subject. However Zupančič complicates these theories of comedy that contend that comedy is immersed in the materiality of human existence because it is invested in "accepting the 'burden' of human finitude, its limitations and embarrassments, and finding joy in them" (Zupančič 2008, 46). Comedy is not just an amelioration of human finitude for Zupančič; rather, she examines how comedy exposes the leak in human finitude, a leak that discloses the inability to accept such finitude, hence the indestructibility of the comic body. Of course, these horror texts are also invested in the finitude of the human subject, but here it leads to the inevitable destruction at the hands of evil wrongdoers. And yet both *The Corpse Grinders* and *The Wizard of Gore* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1970) play with this finitude through temporal ruptures, through editing operations that oscillate between the living human and their post-death materiality as cat food and innards. The disjoint that occurs through the editing and its temporal realignment plays with finitude and its disavowal. In *The Corpse Grinders*, Willy's disavowal or inability to acknowledge his impending demise is intercut with the very materiality of his finitude; comedy emerges in the gap between these frames that demonstrates the intrusion of finitude into the denial of it.

The gags in *The Wizard of Gore* operate in a similar way to the gagging shock cuts in *The Corpse Grinders*, particularly via cuts that disrupt and suture realms of reality and fantasy. Montag the Magnificent is a magician who performs deadly stunts on stage in front of an audience, using hypnosis to lull the audience into observing and disavowing actual bodily harm and murder on the stage. Montag deploys typical magician tricks, such as sawing a person in half, except the veracity of his gory stunts is much more ambivalent, as a canny investigator uncovers when she learns that some of Montag's volunteers who

left the theatre intact have subsequently dropped dead from horrific injuries. Lewis is perhaps best known for inaugurating the subgenre of “splatter horror” with excessive blood and animal guts intensifying the practical effects. The intense gore of Lewis’s oeuvre is explored by Kjetil Rødje in *Images of Blood in American Cinema*, a 2015 study which also avoids approaching low budget exploitation as films to be mocked for their lack of technical polish. I take up Rødje’s assertion that these films deserve to be encountered through “a humorous or reparative approach” by examining the formal mechanisms that align with comedy’s ruptures and its subsequent visceral spectatorial laughter (Rødje 2015, 72). Looking at how the gore effects in the film appear in a way that confuses reality and illusion, most often through cuts, demonstrates how they operate through comedy’s simultaneous rupture and suture of heterogeneous realities in a way that is similar to shock splices in *The Corpse Grinders*.

When Montag performs his tricks, he asks a volunteer from the audience to come on stage to participate in the allegedly phony violence, and in various illusions he uses a chainsaw, a guillotine, a stake, a drill, and a sword to eviscerate his victim’s body. Except, to the audience in the theatre, the body appears to remain completely unharmed. The magic scenes oscillate between images of bodily rupture, of eyeballs gouged out and guts disemboweled accompanied by guttural screams of terror and pain, and images of a quiet, contemplative audience observing the illusion with the woman’s body intact, silent except for a light soundtrack of jingles. As scholars such as Linda Williams and Carol Clover have argued, the female body tends to bear the brunt of visceral violence in horror films (Williams 1991; Clover 1992), which renders laughter at the splatter film’s gore effects potentially contentious as it presumes the laughter is directed against the victim as a subject. While not to dismiss these claims, I am interested in what happens when the violence dealt to a body is complicated through the formal processes of editing, particularly in these magic acts that play with the body’s disintegration and reintegration. Here I find Eugenie Brinkema’s radical formalism valuable in its attention to what happens when we treat violence, bodies and their viscera precisely as a problem of form, a form that in *The Wizard of Gore* is rendered comedic through the montage of divergent orders.⁵ Here, the impossible—actuality and illusion, life and death, the pristine body and its internal viscera—are jarringly cut, severed with an intensity

⁵ Brinkema asks, “what lines of thought are set loose by regarding horror as a deliverance *into* formality, not just for the aesthetic but for philosophy itself, that which intimately shares with horror the problem of how to think violence and ethics as nothing but problems of form?” Eugenie Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 24.

that is augmented by the stark contrast in sound effects between the two orders. And yet, they are also sutured together at the same time, and the differentiation between the illusion and reality is never quite made clear throughout the film. This disordering of levels of reality, then, has parallels with how Zupančič conceives of “comic duality” as not resulting from one element or order split into two parts that remain separated, but that it inheres in “the inconsistency of the One” (Zupančič 2008, 122). In other words, the formal operations of editing that create the inconsistency of a duality that is held in constant tension perform a comedic function in this gruesome text.

What is crucial to Zupančič’s claim is that comedy does not simply reveal dualities or contradictions, but that it is the gap between things that also constitutes their relationship; what is “most central to comedy” is “the function and operation of the copula” (Zupančič 2008, 213). In other words, comedy is the join that both demarcates separation and engenders fusion, a process that has correlations with montage and its operations of bringing together two separate images at the very point of the split between them. The comedy of *The Wizard of Gore*’s fracturing between reality and illusion is complicated even further in the final scenes of the film, after the mystery of Montag’s evil machinations have been uncovered and wrapped up. The reporter and her boyfriend celebrate their success but then start thinking about holes in the logic of what has occurred, when suddenly her boyfriend peels the skin off his face and reveals that he is, in fact, Montag! Montag cackles and asks her “what makes you think you know what reality is?” before disembowelling her with his bare hands. But the tables are soon turned on Montag, as during the attack in which Montag plays with her intestinal viscera, the reporter sits upright, and laughs right back at him. She sways back and forth, laughing, demanding that he look into her eyes, asking him if he thinks he is “the only one who deals in illusion?” She plucks a piece of her innards from her stomach and flicks it away, confounding Montag with her assertion that he is, in fact, her illusion. While editing has a privileged relationship to the “impossible missing link” as comedy as Zupančič defines it, she also demonstrates how “two mutually exclusive realities...to exist alongside each other, and, *moreover*, to be articulated within one and the same scene” (Zupančič 2008, 57). Here, fantasy and reality collide within the image, as the ruptured body reanimates to laugh back at its aggressor while still spilling its viscera, confusing any resolution at which the film had previously arrived. In one last twist of the knife, however, a final cut transitions from a close-up of Montag to a bewildered Montag on stage, who resumes his stage act—and presumably also his murder spree—all over again.

The Gross-Out Gag

The gag that jokes and chokes is also found in exploitation films that may ostensibly be called comedic, even if their transgressive subject matter precludes them from most discussions of mainstream comedy as a generic mode. Films such as *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters, 1972) and *The Worm Eaters* (Herb Robins, 1977) lay claim to a different comedic register, one that deliberately aims to provoke laughter through repulsive—often unsimulated—acts of disgust. The most infamous of all Waters' gags is the final scene of *Pink Flamingos*, when during a long take that stretches the limits of mediation, Divine voluntarily ingests a nugget of freshly excreted dog shit. The film centres on Divine's rivalry with a couple, Connie and Raymond, as they compete for the title of the filthiest person alive, an accolade that Divine assures is hers with this final act of depravity. Divine jokes and chokes throughout the scene, as she mugs and smiles between retches, between the gag reflex that wants to prevent her from swallowing. In a similar move, *The Worm Eaters* treats its viewers to extreme close-ups of chomping teeth and licking lips with wriggling worms spilling out from behind them, guaranteeing the shots' authenticity. The gross-out gag operates through a transgression within the frame rather than between frames and is particularly invested in the crossing of the body's boundary by a revolting object that ought to be rejected. The gag not only works through the cut that sutures, as the same image often contains opposing elements that demonstrate a fundamental accord between the reviled and the ideal in a way that demonstrates the perverse dialectical moves of Bataille's base materialism. Working through Zupančič's theoretical methodology in relation to Georges Bataille's concept of base materialism illuminates a similar comedic operation in the simultaneous cut and suture between the heterogeneous orders of the ideal and the material, of the seductive and repulsive, within the frame.

The Worm Eaters foregrounds the transgression between the body and its exterior emphatically through close-ups that insist upon the gross-out spectacle as a comedy of the limit. That the worm eating is supposed to be comedic is signalled early in the film at a scene that takes place at a spoiled, brattish child's birthday party. Once the birthday song has finished, the child stabs her birthday cake with the cutting knife, but instead of doling out slices as is customary, she grabs a handful of cake in her gloved hands, revealing a host of writhing worms at its centre. The crowd that had been gathered around her immediately scatters, and adults run in fast motion, Benny Hill-style, across the lawn, up trees, and on to the roof to escape the pulsating grotesquery while the child stands gleefully with her handful of worms. But the comedy occurs before the exaggerated

responses of flailing bodies sped up as they run off in disgust. The moment in which the girl discovers the worms operates as a gag, as the supposedly impossible are drawn together in the image of revolting invertebrates and delicious birthday cake. The film follows the town outcast, Herman Ungar (Herb Robins), and his refusal to comply with a nefarious real estate mogul who demands Herman's land deeds. Herman secretly feeds his enemies worms, which turns them into giant worm creatures and scuppers their attempts at stealing his land and destroying the local nature reserve. This plot serves as a vehicle for graphic and gratuitous images of these characters eating their meals with a healthy helping of worms shown via an uncomfortably close, inescapable framing. When a woman attempts to seduce Herman under the mistaken belief that he is secretly rich, he takes revenge by serving her spaghetti with a wriggly twist. She drops the noodles into her mouth with her hands before an extreme close-up of her lips smeared with bright red lipstick occupies most of the frame, with spaghetti strands mingled with live worms dripping from her oral cavity. The gross-out gag here operates at the limit between seductive, rouged lips and the undulating, repulsive creatures trying to escape from them.

Pink Flamingos is similarly replete with gross-out gags that involve the placement of grotesque and obscene objects where they do not belong—a steak for dinner stored in a crotch; a “bowel movement” sent in the mail; a son's flaccid penis in his mother's mouth; and of course, dog feces as a comestible. These gags work because they upset normative hierarchies of the body that privilege its upright comportment, that align the mouth with reason and disavow processes of excretion. But Georges Bataille complicates this hierarchy through his concept of base materialism, which is summarized by Benjamin Noys as such: “The ‘logic’ of base materialism is that whatever is elevated or ideal is actually dependent on base matter, and that this dependence means that the purity of the ideal is contaminated” (Noys 1998, 500). Bataille argues that, “Although within the body blood flows in equal quantities from high to low and from low to high, there is a bias in favor of that which elevates itself, and human life is erroneously seen as elevation” (Bataille 1985, 20). Although the body's material constitution is continually disavowed, it is what enables and upholds the prominence of the face and head as the seats of reason, thought, and idealism. Base materialism finds its most legible articulation in Bataille's essay on the big toe, a rumination on the function of this reviled part of the body, as it is what is responsible for the erect posture of the human. This upright comportment depends upon the foot to maintain this elevated posture: the big toe—grotesque and planted in filth—is responsible for upholding the bodily constitution that supports the conceits of idealism.

For Bataille, it is precisely because the big toe is so ignoble that it also possesses seductive qualities, that it is alluring because it is so repulsive, and the impulse to hide its grotesquery imbues it with a secret seductiveness, a “sexual uneasiness” (Bataille 1985, 21). Reading the seductive aspects of the big toe as a direct result of its grotesquery, rather than in spite of it, illuminates the point at which the disgusting transforms into its opposite, into something alluring. And comedy is found where this limit between the revolting and the seductive are joined through their very divergence, through the visualization of the disgusting object’s capacity to already hold within it the potential for seduction—through their “impossible joint articulation,” to return to Zupančič’s theories of comedy. *Pink Flamingos*’ villains Connie and Raymond Marble explicitly play with the tension between seduction and repulsion in the toe, as they engage in “shrimping,” or erotic toe-sucking. The pair lie top to toe on a bed, rampantly sucking one another’s toes in a heightened frenzy, in an orientation that mimics this ebbing and flowing from the high to the low, from the head to the foot, from the mouth to the toe, through the point of their connection. Here, the buccal organ proclaims its baseness rather than its rationality, as the pair affirm that they love each other “more than [their] own filthiness” in between ramming this most ignoble bodily part into the oral orifice. Bataille points out that the ailments of the foot are comedic in a way that those of the head are not, but it is not just that baseness is inherently comedic, but rather becomes so through gags that play with its role in undergirding the ideal, its dialectical opposite (Bataille 1985, 22). The gross-out images in exploitation films often play with subverting the relationship between the ideal and the base, particularly through the mouth as an organ of reason that also ingests vile materials.

Base materialism demonstrates how the base and ideal are not separate categories that are strictly demarcated but come into being through contact with one another, through the base’s support of the ideal, which becomes comedic when this point of contact is visualized in gross-out gags. The ways that Waters reorganizes the human body are base materialism rendered as comedy; comedy emerges from the points at which the body’s hierarchical constitution is upended and reconfigured through unusual junctures between the ignoble and the ideal. The most provocative attempt at eliciting laughter through disgust comes to fruition in the final sequence of *Pink Flamingos*, when Divine affirms her filthiness by ingesting fleshly excreted dog feces. The coprophagia is preceded by shots of Divine tracing her tongue over her teeth and around her lips, raising her eyes skywards in a facsimile of orgasmic pleasure, smiling and giggling in nervous anticipation. Divine then grins menacingly before daintily

trotting over to a small dog that is defecating. In a single take, Divine squats behind the dog, scoops up the fresh excrement, and shovels it into her face. Bringing new clarity to the phrase “a shit-eating grin,” Divine mugs for the camera, directly addressing the viewer with her unrelenting gaze as she smiles, grimaces, then partially retches, as the shaky handheld camera slowly zooms in on her excrement-encrusted teeth, guaranteeing the act’s veracity through the lack of cut and documentary-style aesthetics. The human constitution privileges the buccal at the expense of the anal, but here the two extremities meet through the image of the unimaginable ingestion of excrement. The separation between the buccal and anal is most prominent at the very moment they come into contact, in a formal mechanism of comedy within the frame.

Other gags in John Waters’s *Pink Flamingos* also play with the “back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse” that is the dialectical movement of base materialism, a dialectics without sublation (Bataille 1985, 21). In another iteration of bodily base materialism, Bataille describes how animal bodies, from the worm to the human, are composed of “a tube with two orifices, anal and buccal,” a constitution that connects the head and the brain to the anus and the adjacent genitals. Bataille returns again to upright comportment of humans: “Because of the erect posture, the anal region ceased to form a perturbation” (Bataille 1985, 89). In *Pink Flamingos*, however, the anal takes precedence once more at Divine’s birthday party during a performance by a singing anus. During the irreverent festivities, Divine is presented with an abundance of gifts, including narcotics, fake vomit, and a real pig’s head, before the entertainment begins. A woman performs a burlesque striptease with a giant snake, then a man gingerly wanders on to the stage, drops his underwear, and contorts himself into an upside-down, crouching position. With his posterior on full display, he begins his routine, pulling open his buttocks: a black, cavernous hole opens, as if his anus is singing, then it sails closed again, with a pink, fleshy protuberance circling the rim, distending his bowels, before the routine repeats over and again. Again, it is not simply that this performance visualizes such a connection between the anus and the mouth, but that its gag, its gross comedy, comes from the short circuit that positions the gaping anus as a mouth, as a debasement of the ideal, presenting base matter as the locus of idealism.

Conclusion

The singing anus scene also visualizes what the gag *does*, as the reverse shot shows the crowd of onlookers laughing in disbelief and giddy disgust. Part of the scene's comedy, then, also emerges through the gap between the image of bodily rupture and what it does to spectators ruptured through laughter. The cut that both separates and joins the anal spectacle and the buccal spectatorial response works through the ruptured image and the experience of beholding it, the tumultuous experience of giddy cachinnations. In the convergence of the effects of disgust and laughter upon the viewer, we understand the simultaneous choke and joke of the gag. These gags are not contained within the screen; rather, unless one is made of a particularly robust constitution, these images work upon the spectator, willingly or reluctantly, and communicate an uncontainable affect amongst an audience beset by disgust and, crucially, laughter. The horrific gag and the gross-out gag both operate in the movement between what it *is* and what it *does*, between the formal mechanism of the cut that sutures the impossible and the image that transgresses limits between heterogeneous elements within the frame, and the revolted laugh that the gag produces as it works upon the spectators' bodies. Zupančič's work on comedy's structure as opposed to its objects is useful in thinking through how comedy occurs through form and not just content, which works towards thinking through their effects and the pleasures inherent in transgressive texts. The pleasures in laughter at exploitation film transcend condescending or even affectionate ridiculing of poor special effects and recourse to shock tactics when attention is paid to how gore and gross-out effects often strategically deploy the comedic operation of playing with dualities. The horrific gag and the gross-out gag demonstrate the affinity between laughter, disgust, and horror as a formal as well as affective problem, a form that jokes and an affect that chokes, that gags its audiences with retching cachinnations.

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