

Smorgasbord

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Smorgasbord (retitled *Cracking Up* by the distributor) is Jerry Lewis's last self-directed feature film. It first opened in France in 1983; it never received a proper American release. (In the US, it was immediately relegated to cable television — which is where I saw it for the first time). And *Smorgasbord* still isn't very well known today — even among Lewis aficionados. (It is, for instance, the only one of Lewis's self-directed films not to appear in the index to *Enfant Terrible*, an academic essay collection edited by Murray Pomerance in 2002, which otherwise covers Lewis' film career quite comprehensively). Yet I think that *Smorgasbord* is one of Jerry Lewis's greatest films; in what follows, I will try to explain why.

Let's begin with some general observations. It is often said — indeed, it is almost a cliché — that comedy is born of despair. Laughter is an outlet for misery. Turning horrible circumstances into a joke is a way of detaching oneself from such circumstances, and as a result avoiding madness and despair. Comedy thus offers us a kind of catharsis. However, this is not a purgation of terror and pity, as Aristotle maintained in the case of tragedy. Rather, it is a purgation of awkwardness and discomfort; or, more intensely, of shame, embarrassment, and humiliation.

But how is such a purgation to be accomplished? Fear and terror are sublime; they point to an overwhelming force, whose advent involves a complete rupture. In the fate of Oedipus or King Lear, a whole world is destroyed. But awkwardness and embarrassment do not work in such a manner. They are worldly states of feeling, often manifested in the most petty details of everyday life. Their purgation, therefore, cannot take place on a grand scale, or all at once. It is rather a slow and excruciating process.

In Jerry Lewis's films, therefore, cathartic purgation does not take place in an explosive moment of relief (as is the case with Aristotelian tragedy, or for that mat-

ter with that sort of comedy that follows the model of Freud's theory of jokes). Lewis's films are devoid of grand conflicts. Instead, they wallow in these harrowing, yet homely and all-too-familiar, negative emotional states. They push conditions of awkwardness and discomfort and embarrassment all the way to the point of exhaustion. The jokes in Lewis's films are often extended in time, beyond the breaking point; or else, they are repeated *ad nauseam*, until they are no longer funny. At the point of exhaustion, humor no longer resides in the (by now overly familiar) joke itself, but rather, reflexively, in the very fact that it is being reiterated without reason.

Take, for instance, the scene in *Smorgasbord* in which Lewis's character tries to order a meal in a restaurant from a zealous waitress, played by Zane Busby. The menu seems to contain a multitude of minute, and nearly meaningless, alternatives. Does Jerry want juice? Busby lists the choices in a grating monotone: "We have apple, grapefruit, pineapple, apricot, orange, lemon, lemon crush, banana, asparagus, avocado, nectarine, tangerine, cherry, or pitless watermelon." And so on, for the salad, the salad dressing, the main course, the rest of the meal, and even beyond. By the end of the dinner, Lewis is utterly worn down and exhausted.

This sequence never really comes to a climax; it is abandoned rather than concluded. We could easily imagine it continuing to infinity. (And indeed, Busby twice reappears in the film, as a parking attendant and then as a movie patron, both times again repeating long lists of alternatives in a monotone). The joke doesn't have a punchline. For us in the audience, there isn't any sudden outburst of laughter. Rather, the humor lies in the whole drawn-out process of the scene, and in the very impossibility of its resolution. We don't get an explosion, but something more like a continual smoldering. For Lewis, paradoxically, comic relief is a slow and excruciating process.

As humor arises from discomfort, it also tends to mobilize a strong element of aggression. I feel irritated, and I want to expel the irritant. Humor can therefore easily issue in violence (think of the Three Stooges), or in insult directed aggressively against others (think of Don Rickles). But Jerry Lewis's comedy does not work this way. For Lewis — and this is perhaps more generally true — comedy is most emotionally riveting, and most therapeutically purging, when the aggression is turned against oneself, instead of against others. Jewish humor in particular often involves a strong element of self-deprecation. One sees this in nearly all of Lewis's work — and also in the early movies of Woody Allen, and in the shows of Larry David today. When Lewis the comedian skewers and lacerates himself,

he wards off by anticipation the multiple humiliations that are sure to be imposed upon him by others.

This is a quintessential strategy that has historically been adopted by Jews, by women, and by members of other oppressed groups. As Lewis himself puts it, in his book *The Total Film-Maker*:

Comedy, humor, call it what you may, is often the difference between sanity and insanity, survival and disaster, even death. It's man's emotional safety valve. If it wasn't for humor, man could not survive emotionally. Peoples who have the ability to laugh at themselves are the peoples who eventually make it. Blacks and Jews have the greatest sense of humor simply because their safety valves have been open so long.

Jewish humor (and African American humor as well) highlights the absurdity of a sort of suffering that nonetheless cannot be avoided; indeed, a suffering that its victims internalize in spite of themselves. We might well compare Jewish humor to another great Jewish invention that endeavors to deal with unavoidable, internalized suffering: psychoanalysis. Like humor, psychoanalysis gives relief by providing a "safety valve" through which one may give vent to otherwise unmentionable miseries. The analytic session, like the movie screen, works as a "safety valve" or a space for purgation. The couch, like the screen, is a place where blockages or "complexes" can be worked through vicariously, in relative safety. This is possible because of what Freud called the "neutrality" of the psychoanalytic session. In comedy films, it is similarly possible because of what Kant called the "disinterest" of aesthetic response. In both cases, sufferers are able to re-enact their traumas vicariously. By reiterating their suffering in this context, they are able to master it — or at least to lessen its impact.

This is why psychoanalytic truths, like comedic insights, generally tend to be self-deprecating ones. The psychoanalytic "cure" consists in recognizing, and giving voice to, the most unpleasant and self-discrediting things that one can find out about oneself. However, psychoanalysis, like comedy, doesn't really provide a permanent solution. The sources of misery still persist, and still torment the client of psychoanalysis, or the spectator of comedy, even after the "treatment" is completed. Freud himself says that the best that psychoanalysis can do is to relegate the sufferer to "ordinary unhappiness." This is why psychoanalysis tends to be, as

Freud acknowledged, an interminable process, like a shaggy-dog story that never comes to a proper end — or like Lewis's gag with Zane Busby in *Smorgasbord*.

Indeed, Jerry Lewis's quintessentially Jewish comedy tends to be both self-deprecating and interminable. The humor of Lewis's films often revolves around frustration and incompetence. Lewis's persona is never able to fulfill the tasks that have been assigned to him; as he struggles interminably to come to some conclusion, his well-meaning efforts instead spread chaos far and wide. Every one of Lewis's character's actions seems to have limitless reverberations, both centrifugally and centripetally. Waves of destruction spread outwards, to infect or contaminate other people, and to overwhelm Lewis's physical surroundings; at the same time, these waves also redound back upon Lewis himself, in such a way as to repeat or reaffirm the very irritation that set things off in the first place. Lewis as filmmaker seeks to track these movements in as much detail as possible, and to articulate them in formal cinematic terms, through the careful manipulation of space and time, of bodily postures and facial expressions, and of camera movements and editing rhythms.

In the opening, pre-credit sequence of *Smorgasbord*, Warren Nefron (Jerry's main character) tries to kill himself. But he proves to be so incompetent that he cannot even accomplish this. As ominous music plays on the soundtrack, a man enters a hotel room. We do not see his face, but only his lower body. He opens a briefcase, and removes a bomb, a gun, a bottle of poison, a bottle of pills, and a hand grenade. Then he takes out a long rope, already formed into a noose. He stands on a chair, loops the rope through something on the ceiling, lifts up the noose to put it around his head (presumably; his head still remains out of frame), and kicks the chair away. But instead of swinging freely through the air from the rope, his legs float gently down back to the floor. Only then does the camera pull back to reveal Lewis's entire figure. Lewis's face registers a look of exasperated, yet unsurprised, frustration (as if he were saying, fatalistically, "oh no, not again..."). His body seems elongated and rubbery as he slowly falls to the floor, the noose still around his neck.

Annoyed but undaunted, Warren tries to hang himself again. Once more he loops the rope on the ceiling, and puts his head in the noose. This time, however, instead of climbing onto a chair, he remains standing on the floor. He silently mouths the word "goodbye." Then he attempts, quite bizarrely, to hoist himself up into the air by pulling down on the other end of the rope. I wonder if there is a subliminal pun here; it's almost as if he were trying to literalize the expression "hoist by his own

petard.” But in any case, such a procedure is of course not physically possible. Even if Warren were somehow able to lever up his own weight, his grip would slacken once he started to suffocate, so that he would (once again) fall back to the floor. Instead of this, however, something unexpected happens. As Warren tugs on the rope, he pulls the ceiling down on himself. Cut to a shot of a large skyscraper imploding.

Warren’s next attempt to kill himself is still more elaborate and convoluted. He sits in a chair in a hotel room, watching a Western on TV. A rifle is poised on a table behind him, aimed right at his head. Warren has tied one end of a string to the rifle’s trigger, and the other to the knob of the door to his room. He calls room service, asking for some ice. The idea is that, when the bellboy opens the door to deliver the ice, the string will be pulled, the gun will go off, and Warren will be shot. But of course, as always happens, Warren’s plan goes awry. The bellboy knocks, but he does not enter. It turns out that the door to the room is locked. Wearily, Warren gets up from his chair and opens the door. The trigger is pulled, and the rifle shoots. The bullet goes through the television set, and kills one of the cowboys on the TV screen. Another cowboy turns, faces out of the screen, draws his gun, and fires a shot that exits the TV screen and kills the bellboy standing in the doorway of the hotel room. Warren’s suicide attempt has been foiled again; instead, he shamefacedly sneaks away.

Of course, I have ruined Lewis’s jokes by explaining them at such great length. What’s more, I have taken Lewis’s entirely visual setups, and tediously translated them into words. But I have not done this only in order to underline the grimness that, in the great Jewish comedy tradition, lies at the base of even Lewis’s silliest jokes. I am also trying to call attention to the heavy *intricacy* of Lewis’s sight gags. Apparently unable to kill himself directly, Warren builds cumbersome and elaborate machines in order to do the job. His own body is just one component of these machines. I am reminded of Buster Keaton’s magical rapport with machines, of Rube Goldberg’s complicated devices for performing simple tasks, and even of Deleuze and Guattari’s “desiring machines.” Lewis’s machines, like all of these, cross boundaries and flatten hierarchies. They ignore distinctions between things and their representations: the bodies in the hotel room and the images on the TV screen are equally affected.

But in one crucial way, Lewis’s machines are the inverse of those constructed by Keaton, Goldberg, and Deleuze and Guattari. The difference is that Lewis’s machines are neurotic rather than schizo, and reiterative rather than transformative.

They only seem able to produce unintended consequences. For all their ramifying, disproportionate, and transformative effects upon their surroundings, they leave Lewis's own persona weirdly unaffected, or stuck in the same place. At the end of *Smorgasbord's* pre-credit sequence — and indeed throughout most of the film, until the very end — Warren Nefron is still a “misfit” (as he later calls himself): out of whack with his surroundings, and uneasily trapped within himself. Comedy may be purgative and transformative for others, but it seems to have no efficacy for the comedian himself.

Consider yet another example from *Smorgasbord*. Warren hires a trainer to help him give up smoking. (The trainer is played by the great Chicago Bears linebacker Dick Butkus). Every time that Warren so much as starts to light a cigarette, Butkus arrives, seemingly from nowhere, and punches him out. It doesn't even seem to matter where Warren is: Butkus shows up in a closed elevator, and comes to life from being a statue in the museum. Giving up smoking is thus an interminable process, just like psychoanalysis itself. Warren's pain and insecurity drives him to try to relieve himself (or self-medicate) through the comfort of smoking: indeed, Butkus begins the “treatment” by evoking for Warren all the pleasures of lighting up, only to scream at him when he nods and agrees. Subsequently, each time that Warren tries to light up, the brutal interruption of this comfort means that he becomes still more pained and insecure, which means that he will inevitably reach for another cigarette, sooner or later. . .

In nearly all of Lewis's self-directed films, his characters have no way to address their dilemmas. They are unable to assert themselves through speech; which means that they are forced to act out (or obsessively repeat) these dilemmas instead. The comedy actively orchestrated by Lewis the director can only be suffered passively by Lewis the performer. In *The Bellboy*, Stanley never gets to speak, because nobody ever gives him the chance to say anything. They are too busy giving him orders, or reproaching him for his errors on the job. In *The Nutty Professor*, Julius Kelp cannot express his desire for Stella, except through the voice of his narcissistic alter ego, Buddy Love. In *The Big Mouth*, Gerald similarly struggles in vain to get anyone to listen to his lengthy explanations of his “problem” (which is not falling in love, as his girlfriend Suzie hopes, but rather his unwanted entanglement with gangsters, as a result of his uncanny resemblance to somebody who is supposed to be dead).

In *Smorgasbord*, this incapacity is both epitomized and inverted; this is one of many ways in which the film works as a culmination of Lewis's entire *oeuvre*.

Speech becomes possible for Warren, only because he goes to the psychoanalyst: somebody who is *paid* to listen to him. The film insists upon — even as it ridicules — the necessity of paying the analyst; you can only get someone to listen to you at the price of what Jacques Lacan called a “symbolic debt.” As Doctor Pletchick (the fatuous psychoanalyst played by Herb Edelman) reminds Warren at one point, “money is no object. We accept furniture, television sets, stereos. . .” Through this sort of payment, the “talking cure” becomes a kind of relay, much in the same way that media like television (in the pre-credit sequence) and musical recording, and also film itself, work as relays. The analytic sessions do not really relieve Warren of his anxieties and incapacities; instead, these analytic sessions (or cinematic scenes) reframe these anxieties, and offer a space for their endless elaboration.

The confluence of psychoanalysis and Jewish humor is usually taken in a more “serious” (if I may use that word) manner than Jerry Lewis is ever willing to provide. One may think of Woody Allen’s films, which I have already mentioned; in the course of Allen’s career, he moves from scattershot absurdist comedy to a more broodingly existential way of reflecting upon the absurdity of life. One may also think of Philip Roth’s early novel *Portnoy’s Complaint*, in which several hundred pages of manic self-loathing and self-justification culminate in the punchline of the psychoanalyst saying: “So [said the doctor]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?” Both Allen and Roth underscore the interminability of psychoanalysis to great comedic effect. But they also both treat psychoanalysis itself with a kind of “seriousness” and “sophistication” (once again I am unsure if these are the proper words) that Lewis refuses, and that he may well be incapable of.

In other words, Lewis — unlike Allen or Roth, and in sharp contrast to Freud’s own recommendations — refuses to *sublimate*. He rejects the notion that psychoanalysis could treat a neurotic blockage by transferring it to a higher plane, just as he rejects the notion that comedy could be redeemed by being sublimated into a “higher” cinematic genre. Lewis notes, in *The Total Film-Maker*, that comedies never win Oscars, and that indeed “there is no comedy category” at all in the Academy Awards: “the whole smell of ‘Comedy, Jesus, that’s low-brow’ has infiltrated motion-picture-industry awards,” he writes. In his treatment of psychoanalysis no less than his treatment of film as entertainment, Lewis remains resolutely “low-brow.” Although his comedies seem to offer — as I am trying to argue — a sort of purgation, they are never edifying or “elevating.” Even the sentimentality of which Lewis is often accused is the result of his stubborn refusal of sublimation (even when it comes in the anodyne form of “sophistication”).

Although Lewis also engages psychoanalysis directly in *Three on a Couch*, it is only in *Smorgasbord* that he pushes the link between comedy and psychoanalysis to its furthest consequences. For here, the film itself directly coincides with the process of the supposed psychoanalytic cure. *Smorgasbord* has almost no linear plot; it consists in a series of independent gags — including the ones that I have already discussed — bound together, at best, by the excuse that they are all episodes that Warren recounts to the analyst. The incidents could therefore be regarded as a series of flashbacks. But even this conceit is stretched, first by Warren’s recounting of incidents in the lives of his ancestors (played of course by Lewis as well), and then by sequences that allow Lewis to impersonate yet other characters with whom Warren only comes into momentary contact (like a Southern sheriff, and a New Age guru).

Many of Lewis’s movies — stretching back to the very first film he directed, *The Bellboy*, have an episodic or picaresque structure, rather than a strict linear narrative. But in *Smorgasbord*, Lewis pushes this tendency further than ever before. Warren Nefron needs psychoanalysis because he is basically an empty shell of a man, devoid of any unity of “character.” He is nothing more than a disaggregated collection of nervous tics, irresistible compulsions, and flailing, self-defeating attempts at what might loosely be conceived as “normality.” But psychoanalytic treatment itself rejects the goal of a unified self or stable ego (the latter was conceived by the “ego psychology” that, as far back as the 1950s, both Jacques Lacan and Norman O. Brown already denounced as a betrayal of Freudian ideas). And the psychoanalytic method of “free association” — even if, as Freud claimed, it is ultimately governed by the “strict determinism of mental events” — appears on the surface as a picaresque, seemingly random, series of digressions and *non sequiturs*. Precisely because it is a sequence of seemingly disconnected scenes, *Smorgasbord* is closer to the underlying logic of Lewis’s comedy — as well as to both the psychoanalytic conception of neurosis and to the psychoanalytic treatment of neurosis — than any more unified narrative possibly could be. (This is evidently also one reason for the original title of the film: Lewis offers us, as it were, a buffet of culinary alternatives, rather than a narrative that starts with soup and ends with dessert).

What all the multiple, proliferating sequences scattered throughout *Smorgasbord* have in common is only (but crucially) that they all turn upon the fundamental liability, and yet seemingly unchangeable klutziness or incapacity, of Lewis’s comedic persona. For instance, one sequence recounts the fate of Warren’s distant

ancestor Jacques, a French prisoner on Devil's Island. Lewis uses a mock French accent. (This would seem to be referring obliquely to his popularity in France, and to the way that many Americans have come to dismiss him as a figure whom only the French love). The accent is an odd construction: it mixes French words with English ones, mangling the pronunciation of both by speaking the words of each language with vowel sounds more typical of the other. It also strays into additional linguistic territory, introducing Japanese intonations at one point, and German words at another. The effect is to produce an alarming instability, through a process of continual modulation.

Yet at the same time, the point of this whole episode is Jacques' inability to escape from his prison. He carefully crafts "ze dummy zat looks like moi," so that he can leave it in his cell, in order to fool the guards, as he runs away. But when the guards toss out the old mattress in which the dummy has been concealed, the dummy leaves the prison and "escapes" to Paris on horseback, while Jacques is left behind in his cell. Once again, Lewis's persona is unable to achieve freedom, even as his machinations have cascading effects beyond the limits of his own confinement.

The actual credit sequence of *Smorgasbord*, immediately following the failed suicide attempts, shows Warren entering the psychoanalyst's office for the first time. Lewis's brilliance as a physical comedian — I am almost tempted to say, as a contortionist — is on full display, as Warren attempts to walk across the office floor and to sit in its sofas and chairs. The floor is immaculate, waxed to a bright, gleaming finish; the furniture is plastic and smooth. As a result, Warren simply cannot get a grip: he keeps doing pratfalls on the floor, and sliding off the chairs. Presumably Warren's inability to so much as get across the room is a physical (or perhaps physiological?) expression of his terror at exposing himself to the analyst's inquiries. The analyst's office is a "smooth space" (as Deleuze and Guattari might put it) within which Warren fears that he may simply dissolve or slip away.

Despite this terror, Warren nonetheless tries to deal with the situation with his usual earnestness and concern for details. He places cigarettes in a trail across the floor, in order to anchor his footsteps. Typically, he crawls forward to lay down the cigarettes, and then — despite having already reached the chair which is his immediate objective — lets himself slide back to his starting place, in order to walk the same distance he has already traversed. As always for Lewis's comedic personae, the *procedure* that he settles upon to solve his problems becomes more important in its own right, than actually achieving the very goal for which the pro-

cedure was originally devised. This is yet another formula for the interminability, both of comedy and of psychoanalysis.

In the credit sequence, Warren similarly solves the problem of sliding off the smooth plastic sofa and chairs by dousing a pocked handkerchief in alcohol, and then sitting upon it, thereby creating enough friction to stay in place. Once again, Lewis's persona tries to resolve an intractable problem by scrupulously ignoring its major causes, and instead focusing on its most minute details. This is what allows Lewis's gags to continue at such length: each of them involves a series of ingenious partial solutions that actually do work to a certain extent, but also result in prolonging the basic situation that they are meant to address. Yet again, this is the very mechanism by which both comedic invention and psychoanalytic experimentation are subject to interminable extension.

I am sorely tempted to go on and analyze every single sequence of *Smorgasbord* in detail. In particular, I would like to say more about the psychoanalyst, Dr. Pletchick, who in Herb Edelman's performance becomes the last in a long line of overbearing, yet ultimately vain, ridiculous, and empty, male authority figures appearing in nearly all of Lewis's movies. The deflation of patriarchal authority is a crucial element of Lewis's comedy, and one that dovetails with its psychoanalytic affiliations. But for reasons of length I will drop these considerations, and instead skip ahead to the film's conclusion.

I have been arguing that comedy and psychoanalysis are both properly interminable, so that the purgation they promise is only delivered piecemeal, and can never be achieved once and for all. Yet of course, any film, like any treatment, empirically needs to conclude at some point (even if this, most grimly, only happens with the death of the protagonist or analysts). There is no linear progression in *Smorgasbord*; Warren Nefron is no closer to being "cured" after all his extensive sessions with Dr. Pletchick than he was at the very beginning. The only way out is by some sort of *deus ex machina* — and Dr. Pletchick accomplishes this by reverting from psychoanalysis to the very technique that Freud had earlier tried and then rejected: hypnosis.

At the end of the film, then, Dr. Pletchick hypnotizes Warren. For his part, Warren, of course, is only too willing to be hypnotized, since his labile character is such that he is already overly influenced by anything and everything that he encounters. Under hypnosis, Warren is told that his symptoms will all disappear by post-hypnotic suggestion, once Dr. Pletchick repeats to him the magic word:

smorgasbord. Dr. Petchick awakens Warren, and drags him out of the building and onto the street. He repeats the magic word to Warren, and the result is instantaneous. Warren is now, for all practical intents and purposes, “normal.” A well-functioning male heterosexual subject, he crosses the street and starts chatting up some women whom he meets.

Of course, such a magical “cure” cannot come without a price. This cost is a kind of transference (though, in strict psychoanalytic vocabulary, it is probably best described as *counter-transference*). All the symptoms that have been excised from Warren’s body and mind reappear instead in Dr. Petchick. All of a sudden the psychiatrist has adopted all of Warren’s mannerisms and incompetencies. He lights a cigarette and gets punched out by Dick Butkus; he flails about, running this way and that, causing cars to crash and structures to topple, spreading chaos all around him. The film cuts from this to one final sequence: Warren and his girlfriend are coming out of a movie theater, where they have just been watching “Jerry Lewis in SMORGASBORD (The Movie).” (The transition is actually a slow dissolve, rather than a clean cut; by stopping the DVD at just the right moment, I was able to see Dr Petchick, in his confused state, superimposed upon the image of the movie marquee).

At the end of *Smorgasbord*, therefore, Lewis once again demonstrates his penchant for self-referentiality, which has been noted by many critics. In particular, Chris Fujiwara has shown how Lewis’s self-referential moments are often autobiographical ones as well. But here, self-referentiality is linked to another one of Lewis’s most important thematic and structural devices: that of comedic disorder as a sort of infection and contagion. The dysfunctional traits of Lewis’s characters — stammering, moving about clumsily, manifesting various nervous tics and speech disorders — are always being transferred among numerous personas (in films — such as *The Family Jewels* — where Lewis plays multiple roles), or else transmitted from Lewis-the-actor to characters played by other actors (this occurs most notably in *The Big Mouth*).

In *Smorgasbord*, these two operations — self-referential doubling, and the contagious transmission of dysfunctional affects — seem to be two sides of the same operation. Comedy is supposed to be purgative and cathartic. But it cannot really get rid of the awkwardness, discomfort, embarrassment, and humiliation that are its representational content and its purgative targets. Instead, it can only eliminate these symptoms, or structures of feeling, from one place by implanting them elsewhere instead. It’s as if the world operated according to some weird metaphysical

law of the conservation of affects. In particular, the negative emotions with which comedy has to deal are never abolished. Instead, the “safety valve” of comedic relief causes them to be transferred from one persona or character to another, and ultimately (through the self-referential leap of aesthetics) from the movie as a whole to its audience. In real life, Jerry Lewis has been a tireless apostle for the healing power of comedy; indeed, he has conducted numerous “Laughter & Healing Seminars.” But even as Lewis’s movies perform the healing miracle of comedic catharsis, they also continually remind us of just how tenuous, and how interminable, the “healing” process which they dramatize can be.