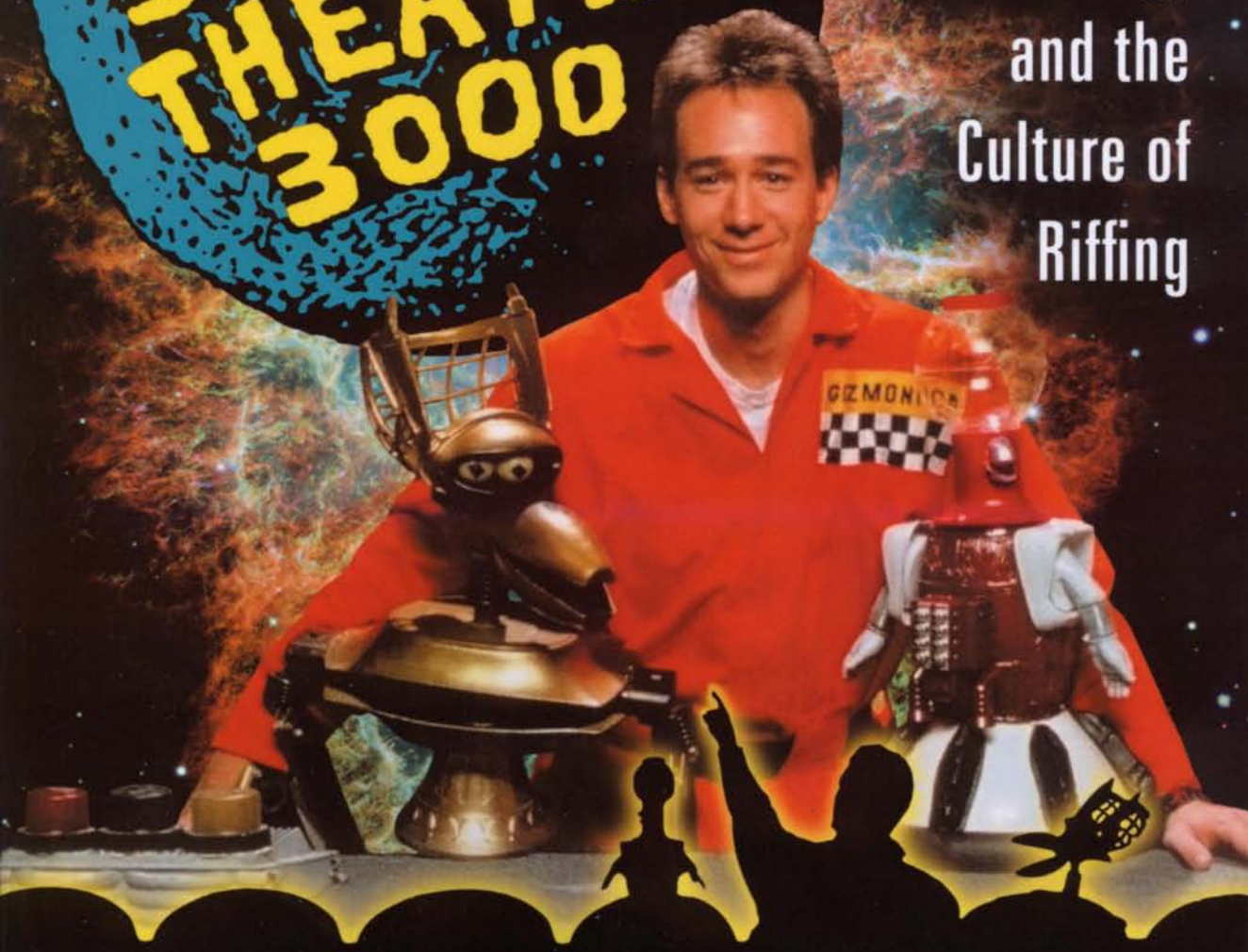
IN THE PEANUT GALLERY WITH MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000

Essays on Film, Fandom, Technology and the Culture of Riffing



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"Hamlet will return in *Thunderball*": Historical Precedents of Riffing

by Mark McDermott

The ability to superimpose critical or humorous comments on an existing performance seems to be a recent development made possible by modern technology. Certainly the casual observer of *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* and its spin-offs would see a similarity to earlier TV entertainments like the old horror movies presented on local TV by acerbic hosts in campy horror settings. But it is possible to dig a bit deeper and find occasional comedic presentations that wouldn't sound out of place being enacted by Joel or Mike, and the 'Bots.

This chapter will attempt to define the elements of riffing that set it apart from other types of literary or dramatic lampoons. Then, some examples of performance that fall under this definition will be offered for consideration. Through examples from the years before recorded performance, I hope to be able to make it possible to bring up more obscure, but no less enlightening examples.

A Riff by any other name

Mystery Science Theatre 3000 has named and codified the form of entertainment known as "riffing." Following are the elements that transform mere rudeness in movie theatres into riffing:

1. A riff is humorous commentary being made about a work not produced by the riffers. There are plenty of movies and plays where an actor breaks that "fourth wall" to address the audience about the play itself, and even gets heckled by audience members or the unseen narrator. But these have been a part of the original script, not imposed from without by a third party without the cooperation of the producers.
2. It is also expected, though not mandatory, that the riffs be performed by characters with their own back-story and ongoing plot. This creates continuity between episodes of a series in which the presentations being riffed on are totally unrelated. *Beavis and Butt-Head* (1993-1997) built on this premise by focusing equally on the title characters' dunderheaded conversations on music videos and on their crude antics away from the TV.

3. The riffing is also effective if the characters of the original production remain ignorant of the fact that their performance is being critically hammered. This tends to leave off many presentations based on vaudeville, in which veteran performers are used to dealing with hecklers in the audience. When Fozzie Bear reacts to being razzed by balcony-dwellers Statler and Waldorf, it merely shows that the apparent "riffing" is a part of *The Muppet Show's* meta-textual script.

While they lay outside the scope of the above definitions, we will examine some of the more influential "Comedy Dubs" or "Gag Dubs." This is the term used by TVTropes.com (2010) and others to describe films created by dubbing comedic dialog or narration over older movies, or those originally shot in another language. This subset includes favorites like the Jay Ward-produced *Fractured Flickers* and Woody Allen's *What's Up, Tiger Lily?*

Euripedes? Eumenides! or The Greeks Had an App for That!

It's not surprising that the earliest accessible ancestor of riffing can be found during the first literary movement of Western civilization, the Greek theatre. Aristophanes was one of the first to "riff" on the work of an equally famous competitor. Aristophanes was active at a plateau in popular culture similar to our own: A body of literature or drama that was popular with the public, and an audience familiar enough with many contemporary plays to recognize the tropes and cliches of another dramatist's work when they were being parodied.

The theatre of Aristophanes' time was presented during the festivals of Dionysus (Bacchus), first at the established City Dionysia, and then expanded to the Lenaia (dedicated to the female worshippers of Dionysus). Though the festivals were religious in nature, they celebrated Dionysus' status as the god of the man's darker nature: drunkenness and bawdy behavior (Theodoridis, 2010).

Several plays would be presented during the nearly week-long festivals, with first and second prizes awarded by a panel of judges. Performers and writers at the Dionysia had license to offer opinions that might be considered treasonous beyond the safety of the stage. Aristophanes' *Peace* (422 BCE) was one of his plays known to have won the festival prize, even though it criticized the Peloponnesian War, then in its tenth year. Many of Athens' prominent citizens were mocked throughout Aristophanes' plays, including Cleon, Plato and Sophocles. But Aristophanes twice drew his blade on the tragedian Euripides (c. 480 bce – 406 BCE). In *The Thesmophoriazusae* (412 BCE) Aristophanes called Euripides to task for the women characters in his plays. After Euripides' death, *The Frogs* (405 BCE) presented Dionysus himself as being so moved by Euripides' tragedy *Andromeda,* he descends to Hades to bring the poet back to Earth. Dionysus finds Euripides arguing with Aeschylus over who was the greater dramatist, for the chance to sit at Hades' side. Dionysus judges a competition in which each critiques the work of the other. Aeschylus' critique involves letting Euripides recite the expository openings of his plays before inserting "…and he lost his prick!" After several other rounds of competition, Dionysus decides to take back Aeschylus instead (2010).

Although Aristophanes often quoted scraps of dialog from the writers he was satirizing, in *The Thesmophoriazusae (Women at the Festival),* he presents a caricature of Euripides himself enacting scenes from his plays, while being heckled by other characters. The play's title refers to the Thesmophoria, an Athenian women's festival in honor of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone. A woman's council has summoned Euripides to answer before them for

his portrayal of woman characters in his plays. Fearing for his life, Euripides convinces his father-in-law Mnesilochus to disguise himself as a woman and infiltrate the festival to plead his case. Once there, though, Mnesilochus delivers a rant against the other sex himself. The women penetrate Mnesilochus' disguise, forcing him to seek sanctuary in the festival's temple. Mnesilochus gets an urgent rescue plea out to Euripides, who arrives as characters from his plays, repeating lines obviously familiar to contemporary Athenians, while the women of the festival offer comments. Here Mnesilochus begins to quote the opening lines of Euripedes' *Helen* (412 BCE). The role of "Seventh Woman" is so-called as she was the seventh unnamed woman to speak:

MNESILOCHUS: I have contracted quite a squint by looking round for him, and yet Euripides does not come. Who is keeping him? No doubt he is ashamed of his cold Palamedes. What will attract him? Let us see! By which of his pieces does he set most store? Ah! I'll imitate his Helen, his lastborn. I just happen to have a complete woman's outfit.

SEVENTH WOMAN: What are you ruminating over now again? Why are you rolling up your eyes? You'll have no reason to be proud of your Helen, if you don't keep quiet until one of the Prytanes arrives.

MNESILOCHUS (as Helen): "These shores are those of the Nile with the beautiful nymphs, these waters take the place of heaven's rain and fertilize the white earth, that produces the black syrmea."

SEVENTH WOMAN: By bright Hecaté, you're a cunning varlet.

MNESILOCHUS: "Glorious Sparta is my country and Tyndareus is my father."

SEVENTH WOMAN: He your father, you rascal! Why, 'tis Phrynondas.

MNESILOCHUS: "I was given the name of Helen."

SEVENTH WOMAN: What! you are again becoming a woman, before we have punished you for having pretended it a first time!

MNESILOCHUS: "A thousand warriors have died on my account on the banks of the Scamander."

SEVENTH WOMAN: Why have you not done the same?

MNESILOCHUS: "And here I am upon these shores; Menelaus, my unhappy husband, does not yet come. Ah! how life weighs upon me! Oh! ye cruel crows, who have not devoured my body! But what sweet hope is this that sets my heart a-throb? Oh, Zeus! grant it may not prove a lying one!"

EURIPIDES (as Menelaus): "To what master does this splendid palace belong? Will he welcome strangers who have been tried on the billows of the sea by storm and shipwreck?"

MNESILOCHUS: "This is the palace of Proteus."

EURIPIDES: "Of what Proteus?"

SEVENTH WOMAN: Oh! the thrice cursed rascal! how he lies! By the goddesses, 'tis ten years since Proteas died.

This dialogue continues with the woman answering back to the parroted dialogue, until a magistrate (the aforementioned Prytane) arrives, and Euripides beats a retreat. The magistrate orders Mnesilochus bound to a post and prepared for a public lashing. His guard, a Scythian archer, binds Mnesilochus, then sits nearby. Euripides reappears disguised as Perseus, signaling Mnesilochus to act the title role of Andromeda.

Between lines from *Andromeda,* the in-laws inform each other of the need to buy off the guard to effect an escape. Euripides suddenly assumes the role of Echo from the same play and gives us several pages of the "Repeat after me" bit (which means that gag is over 2,400 years old). Euripides departs again, returning with a dancing girl and a flute player. He promises the women he will not write another word against them if they drop the charges. They agree, but refuse to intervene in Mnesilochus' case. For the Scythian, Euripides has the girl practice her nude dancing, then give him what we now call a "lap dance." The

two head offstage to follow their instincts, giving Euripides time to free Mnesilochus and hurry off, leaving the chorus to misdirect the derelict guard with a "they went thataway!"[1]

"What's worse than clowns? Danish clowns!"

A Midsummer Night's riffing

One of the more unusual episodes of *MST3K* was the Season 10 riff on *Hamlet.* This "Hamlet" was a 1961 German TV production, acted in German, with Maximilian Schell as the moody prince, then overdubbed back into English (2003). However, William Shakespeare (1564–1616) himself offered his own play-within-a-play featuring some definite riffs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1594–1596).

As in the Greek classical period, the Elizabethan theatre scene offered an ideal situation to allow one writer to riff upon another's work. English theatre saw a flowering of straightforward drama, as opposed to stylized mystery and morality plays. A burgeoning theatre scene gave the public many chances to attend and become familiar with theatre, and what separates good drama from bad. Developments in printing meant societies could preserve more plays for posterity, study, and revival.

It's certain the theatre-going audience was well familiar with the tragedy *Pyramis and Thisby.* Shakespeare himself pinched the plot for his own *Romeo and Juliet,* probably written around the same time as *Midsummer Night's Dream.* The original story of doomed lovers dates back to Roman mythology, first preserved in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 CE) and has been constantly modernized all the way to *The Fantasticks* (1960). In the final act of *Midsummer Night's Dream,* after all the tangled romantic and magical plot threads have been unraveled, Duke Theseus of Athens and his wedding party: Demetrius, Lysander, and Hippolyta, watch an amateur presentation of *Pyramis and Thisby,* and their high spirits overtake the production. No doubt audiences at the Globe has already endured performances of the story by local "rude mechanicals."

Bottom [as Pyramus]: … Thanks, courteous wall: Jove shield thee well for this!
But what see I? No Thisby do I see.
O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss!
Cursed be thy stones for thus deceiving me!

Theseus: The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again.

Bottom: No, in truth, sir, he should not. 'Deceiving me' is Thisby's cue: she is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall. You shall see, it will fall pat as I told you. Yonder she comes.

The players offer the setup scenes between Thisby and Pyramus; and Wall. Following this, the piece's Lion introduces himself, then a player disguised as the Moon, whom the Duke's friend Demetrius suggests is known in the neighborhood as a cuckold:

Starveling: [as Moonshine] This lanthorn doth the horned moon present;—

Demetrius: He should have worn the horns on his head.

Theseus: He is no crescent, and his horns are invisible within the circumference.

Starveling: This lanthorn doth the horned moon present;
Myself the man i' the moon do seem to be.

Theseus: This is the greatest error of all the rest: the man should be put into the lanthorn. How is it else the man i' the moon?

Demetrius: He dares not come there for the candle; for, you see, it is already in snuff.

HIPPOLYTA: I am aweary of this moon: would he would change!
THESEUS: It appears, by his small light of discretion, that he is in the wane; but yet, in courtesy, in all reason, we must stay the time.
LYSANDER: Proceed, Moon.
STARVELING: All that I have to say, is, to tell you that the lanthorn is the moon; I, the man in the moon; this thorn-bush, my thorn-bush; and this dog, my dog.
DEMETRIUS: Why, all these should be in the lanthorn; for all these are in the moon. But, silence! here comes Thisbe.

The play within the play lurches to its conclusion, with the wedding party offering their commentary as first Pyramus then Thisby commit prolonged suicide scenes.

Is it possible there were other plays out there mocking Shakespeare's work in the same way? The Elizabethan theatre world had a lot of axes to grind, not the least against this rube who came to London from the sticks to write plays set in locations he couldn't possibly have visited.

Precedents for Riffing in the Cinema and the Fourth Wall

The elements that *MST3K* would draw on to build their brand of comedy were present in some form from the very start of motion pictures over 120 years ago. The earliest films were "actualities," short clips of everyday surroundings or exotic places. Other early films recorded vaudeville artists doing their acts, and as the movie industry discovered the narrative form, many of these vaudeville performers became the first movie actors. These stage performers knew a thing or two about dealing with unruly live theatre patrons, and could sometimes carry that interaction over to an imagined movie theatre audience.

Additionally, the growth of the movie industry offered opportunities to create many tropes of the medium that could be seen as ancestors to riffing. Whether it was newsreel actualities and "B-roll" footage in the studio library, or entire features slipping into public domain due to bankruptcy or even secretarial error, there would arise a library of films free to be re-presented in a format that mocked the originals.

Interacting with uncooperative audiences, re-connecting to crowd reactions lost in the movies, began nearly with the start of projected movies. One of Edison's earliest narrative films, *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903), ended with an outlaw drawing a bead on the camera to "shoot" the audience. The visceral action placed the audience in the place of the bandit's robbery victims, drawing them across the screen into the story.

Movie performers sought to keep their viewers in on the gag ever since. Warner Brothers cartoon director Fred "Tex" Avery made the theatre audience part of several shorts. Daffy Duck's second appearance, in *Daffy Duck and Egghead* (1937), opened with Egghead, a prototype of Elmer Fudd, becoming so annoyed at the rotoscoped silhouette of a movie patron who won't sit down, that he shoots him dead. Avery's gangster movie parody, *Thugs with Dirty Mugs* (1939), shows its Edward G. Robinson inspired gangster, "Killer Diller," discussing his next caper, but getting distracted by a patron leaving his seat:

"Hey, bud! You in the audience! Where do you think you're going?"
"Well, Mr. Killer, this is where I came in."
"Well, you sit right back down there 'til this thing's over, see!
(To his gang:) That mug's trying to get out of the theatre to squeal to the cops!"

The shadow gets up again in the next scene to inform policeman "Flat-Foot Flanigan (with a Floy-Floy)" of Killer's plans, since he'd already seen the picture. These examples of

audience interaction seem to be major influences on the visual representation of *MST3K's* riffers as audience shadows on the screen.

Many other vaudeville-based comedians built their awareness of the film audience into their movies, and even stepped outside the frame to comment on goings-on. *Hellzapoppin'* (Potter 1941), based on the 1938 musical revue by comedians Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson, demolished barriers between the movie, the studio, its audience, and even the film's projectionist, played by Shemp Howard ("Fifteen years I've been runnin' these pictures. Now, all of a sudden, I gotta be an actor!"). Olsen and Johnson demanded the projectionist reverse the film to review a missed plot point: "What'sa matter with you guys? Don't cha know you can't talk to me *and* the audience?" "Well, we're doin' it, aren't we?"

Comedy Dubs

Given the chaotic nature of the early movie distribution system, it seems impossible to imagine that some enterprising or bored editor in some rural theatre at the end of the distribution chain didn't at some time take scraps of worn-out movies and paste clips together with new, humorous title cards. But we can say with a certainty that at least by the 1930's Hollywood was recycling its older films to humorous effect.

The most accessible example is the cartoon *Daffy Duck in Hollywood* (Avery, 1938). After wreaking havoc on a movie set, Daffy finds the studio's film library, and pastes together several live action clips into an early "Comedy Dub:" a roaring lion appears to say "Motion pictures are your best entertainment," while footage of a beauty pageant segues to the announcement of its winner, a circus fat lady. Studio shorts departments sometimes offered similar fare, even some newsreels and travelogues could be considered comedy dubs, since most of the footage was shot silent and depended on a narrator to explain the action. Pete Smith produced some 200 one-reel "Specialties" shorts for MGM, featuring his sardonic narration over footage of the subject at hand.

By the 1960's, large film libraries could be purchased or accessed, as older studios went out of business and their films fell into public domain, or established studios sold their libraries to TV. Features and cartoons were immediately profitable, but newsreels and actualities of limited interest could be had cheaply. The growth of foreign film markets, whether art-house affectations or Japanese monster movies, opened an avenue for lesser-known features to enter the hungry American television market. Some of this more esoteric material would become the basis of what is now called the "comedy dub" or "dub parody" program.

Supplying new dialog or narration to old film footage is also an extension of adding comedic captions to photographs, a staple of late night talk shows, paperbacks, and mail-in contests. *The New Yorker* offers a weekly online caption contest, invite readers to submit new punch lines for one of its cartoons.

The first American production to make this diversion the basis of a regular series was *Fractured Flickers*, a 1963 syndicated half-hour TV show created by *Rocky & Bullwinkle* writer Chris Hayward and produced by Jay Ward. Its onscreen narrator Hans Conried would introduce a short film like "Dinky Dunston, USC Boy Cheerleader," composed of clips from Lon Chaney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923), with dialogue dubbed by Jay Ward's repertoire players: Bill Scott, Paul Frees and June Foray. Conried also read fake commercials, say, for a cheap real estate development, over footage of buildings being smashed by a cyclone from *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928); and conducted interview segments with

entertainers of the day: Fabian, Rod Serling, Bob Newhart, even Bullwinkle J. Moose as a hand puppet.

What's Up Tiger Lily? (1966) took the comedy dub to the big screen. Its genesis was with Henry G. Saperstein, owner of the UPA animation studio (Mr. Magoo). Seeing American International Pictures turning a profit by redubbing foreign films, inserting new scenes with American actors, Saperstein purchased rights to a 1965 Toho spy movie that AIP had found too convoluted to redub: *Kokusai himitsu keisatsu: Kagi no kagi (International Secret Police: Key of Keys)*. He engaged Woody Allen, fresh from his screenplay for the hit comedy *What's New Pussycat?* (1965), offering him $66,000 to dub over comic dialogue and make the movie into a TV special, with a new title reminding viewers of that earlier hit (Nesteroff 2010). Allen changed the plot's MacGuffin from missing microfilm to a stolen egg salad recipe. Allen also appeared behind the end credits as the film's projectionist while Mort Sahl's wife — *Playboy's* August 1964 Playmate of the Month China Lee — disrobed, and the credit scroll read "if you have been reading this instead of looking at the girl, then see your psychiatrist, or go to a good eye doctor." Saperstein decided the movie could earn more money as a theatrical feature, so he expanded its running time by splicing in footage from other Japanese films, dubbed by an Allen impersonator, and adding musical numbers by The Lovin' Spoonful.

Further comedy dub projects appeared over the next decades. Philip Proctor and Peter Bergman of The Firesign Theatre produced *J-Men Forever* (1979), in which they appeared in black and white to frame a story constructed from Republic serials like *Spy Smasher, Captain Marvel,* and *Captain America,* with new dialog in which federal agents fight the Lightning Bug, a villain planning to conquer the world with rock'n'roll. The movie was a favorite on USA Network's video variety bloc *Night Flight* (1981-1988). A California-based comedy group, the L.A. Connection, had been presenting re-dubbed movie theatrically, starting with *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman* in 1982, then began performing live movie dubs and producing dubbed clips for the talk show *Thicke of the Night*. Starting in 1984, they produced 26 syndicated episodes of *Mad Movies with the L.A. Connection*, an expansion of the *Fractured Flickers* concept in which entire features were condensed into half-hour episodes, redubbed to produce a totally different story. Their version of *Nothing Sacred* (1937) re-wrote Carole Lombard into an older Dorothy trying to get back to Oz. The troupe also got out a theatrical release for *Blobermouth* (1990), re-presenting *The Blob* (1958) with an animated mouth telling Henny Youngman style jokes as it devours Steve McQueen's hometown.

Self-made riffing

STATLER: I like that last number.
WALDORF: What did you like about it?
STATLER: It was the *last* number!

Implicit in all of these idioms previously discussed is the willingness to make fun of the very presentation in which someone is appearing. The "Road" pictures of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby featured the pair's metatextual ad libbing about their radio personas, personal relationship, and Paramount Pictures. *Road to Utopia* (1946) included humorist Robert Benchley as its narrator, sniping at the entire proceeds like he was narrating a *Mad* lampoon of the movie instead. By my narrow definition, *Mad,* while highly influential, offered little

that could fit these definitions of proto-riffing, since their parodies involved caricatures of a show's actors commenting on the show itself, rather than specific plot points. One example that came much closer to the MST3K mode was a series of parodies of the VH-1 *Pop-Up Video* series (1996-2002), since they secured the right to print actual stills from music videos, overlaid with their "Pop-Off" jabs.

The influence of *Mad* on self-referential humor, though, is rather easily seen on other programs. *The Muppet Show*, somewhat like *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* ten years before, owed a debt to the *Hellzapoppin'* type of variety show where "anything could happen, and probably will." *The Muppet Show* added extra layers of meta-text by featuring Kermit the Frog's backstage travails in keeping the stage show together. A further layer of self-reference was added in the form of Statler and Waldorf, the geezers in the loge box who offered insults after nearly every segment.

"Unpleasant Dreams, Darlings!"

The Hosted Movie Show

An influence on the show's structure often cited by Joel Hodgson has been the *CBS Children's Film Festival*, a Saturday morning program featuring children's films from around the world, hosted by Kukla, Fran and Ollie. (*Satellite News*, 2010)

Hodgson only noted the fact that he had watched the show, in which Fran Allison and her puppet friends Ollie Dragon and Kukla (puppeteered by Burr Tillstrom) discussed the featured films during the commercial breaks, sometimes explaining cultural differences in the international movies. On some episodes they would do short skits to fill time. The show had appeared occasionally on Saturdays, and on summer weekday afternoons since 1967. It was given a permanent Saturday morning slot from 1971 until Fran and the Kuklapolitans were dropped in 1977, with abbreviated specials appearing until 1984.

The Best Brains' show was the latest in a line of local TV shows presenting genre movies, introduced by a themed host. The most popular of these shows ran horror movies starting in the 1950s, with a ghoulishly attired host who, during the low-budget days of early local TV, was also that station's weatherman, cartoon host, sportscaster or booth announcer. The host from which it might be said all others spawned was actress Maila Nurmi's Vampira. Nurmi hosted *The Vampira Show* on KABC-TV, Los Angeles, in 1954 dressed as a wasp-waisted version of the then-unnamed mother in Charles Addams cartoons (Greene 1994). In 1957, Universal offered "Shock!," a library of its horror and science fiction films to local stations, including suggestions for "host" characters and appropriate promotional gimmicks. Each host, be they named Zacherley the Cool Ghoul, Ghoulardi or Morgus the Magnificent, mocked the films and offered sick humor around the commercial breaks, and would directly address the viewers through the camera, or by reading their fan mail.

The use of themed hosts for genre narratives went back to the early days of radio drama. Alonzo Dean Cole wrote and directed possibly the first of these, *The Witches Tale* (1931–1938) for the Mutual network. The pulp magazine hero The Shadow first appeared on radio in 1931 as narrator of *Detective Story Hour*, an anthology dramatizing stories from Street & Smith's *Detective Story Magazine*. He began fighting crime himself on radio in 1937 (Dunning, 1998). *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* (1941–1952) was hosted by Raymond Johnson — with the notorious squeaking door — the first narrator to inject morbid humor in his

shows. His style was picked up by "Mr. Crime," the narrator of the comic book series *Crime Does Not Pay* (1942–1955), which in turn informed the "GhouLunatics" of EC Comics' horror titles *Tales from the Crypt, The Vault of Horror* and *The Haunt of Fear* (1950–1955). All these hosts spoke to the reader or listener, offering grisly puns and sick humor to lighten the grim tone of the stories. Their style was seen in all the horror hosts of the 1950's, as well as in some of the narrators of network television's dramatic anthologies. The opening of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–1965), in particular, featured its host, making droll remarks about the upcoming story or his sponsors, sometimes while in some staged peril like standing in quicksand or wearing a hangman's noose.

It is worth noting that a virtually unknown hosted movie show appeared just one season before *MST3K's* run. *The Canned Film Festival* (1986) was packaged by Dr. Pepper, and featured Laraine Newman as the manager-usherette of a run-down theatre showing classics like *Robot Monster* and *Eegah!* to a regular cast of "locals." The discussions of the movie between commercials tended to be more factual than humorous, and the "leave me alone" attitude of Newman's character was much less engaging than Joel and the 'Bots' horseplay. The syndicated 90-minute program ran only 13 episodes.

Audience Participation

"Say good-bye to all this…" *Good-bye, all this!*
"And hello to oblivion!" *Hi, Oblivion! How are the wife and kids?*

The most recent precursor to the riffing style of comedy has been the "cult" or "midnight movie" film that is experienced as part of an audience participation ritual. The best-known of this kind of film has been *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). Less than a year after its mainstream release, the adaptation of a campy musical spoof on Hammer horror films moved onto the midnight film circuit and almost immediately served as the nucleus of a film cult. Its adherents interact with the movie on many levels: shouting out in unison rude comments, or questions that are answered by the next line of screen dialogue; throwing objects — toast, rice, frankfurters, etc. — at proper cues; or dancing in the aisles and in front of the screen during "*Rocky Ho's*" musical numbers. Some showings involve "shadow casts" wearing costume reproductions and enacting the entire movie as it plays behind them on the screen. *RHPS,* in fan shorthand, has set a world record by remaining in continuous release for 35 years.

During the 1960's, theatres in cities and college towns often programmed midnight movies that encouraged greater audience involvement: old serials found patrons cheering the heros and booing the villains. The rediscovery in 1971 of the exploitation classic *Reefer Madness* (1936) became a touchstone for the stoner culture; and profits for its distributor helped fund what is now New Line Cinema. Other films that have briefly inspired camped audience participation include *Mommie Dearest* (1981). Generally, there have not been many more pictures that have inspired as much communal activity. Possibly, once the *Rocky Horror* phenomenon was known, it would be too difficult to create a movie that could recreate its cultural growth organically. There was also the decline of the midnight movie circuit in the face of home entertainment. However, some form of group interaction still lives on with camp and drag elements such as with the *Sing-a-Long Sound of Music*, complete with costume contests, recommended props and audience interactions. A British company, Sing-A-Long-A, now packages and tours "Sing-Along" showings for *Rocky Horror* and movies like *The Wizard of Oz, Mary Poppins, Hairspray and High School Musical 3.* On 8 July, 2010, Paramount released

Grease: Sing-A-Long, with subtitles for the musical numbers, some of which had lyrics cleaned up for younger audiences (Barnes).

Five premises in search of a conclusion

The interaction between the prisoners of the Satellite of Love and the movies they are forced to watch is only the latest twist in a long history of interaction between the storyteller and his audience. Considering that the brightest lights in early drama engaged in a little sniping at works they didn't care for, it's surprising that so few other examples come to mind. At the end of the 19th Century, commercialization of the phonograph and motion picture enabled performers to produce recorded works for audiences anywhere in the world, and far into the future. This, in effect, shut off the give and take the performer had with their audience in the millennia before. Almost immediately, producers looked for ways to draw the audience into the artificial world of motion pictures. However, the effect can instead further insulate the fictional world from our own by creating another reality, with a fictional audience reacting as events on the screen spill out into their world, but not ours.

The screwball comedies of the 1930s were a milieu for stage comics to mediate a new form of movie reality. The Marxes, Olsen & Johnson, Bob Hope and others were at once characters in a movie, their onstage personae commenting on their screen characters, and the comedian pausing after each gag line so as not to step on the imagined audience laughter.

Radio was negotiating its own relationship with the audience by using regular narrators to introduce stories and fill in visual details missed by radio's aural dialogue. In radio horror series, the narrator could change from a neutral interlocutor to an active participant, interceding between the fantastic characters of the story and the mundane world of the listener.

This mediation of movie reality carried over to the wisecracking midnight movie hosts, letting frightened children know in certain ways that what they were watching was only a movie, and often not a very good one. The Satellite of Love crew, like the movie hosts preceding them, created new, derivative works that incorporated the old movies and their mockery of them. Shakespeare and Aristophanes may have made their riffing of another author's work a small part of their own work, but they were clearly prescient in the rise of this genre.

Notes

1. George Theodoridis, a retired Australian teacher, has undertaken new translations of the Greek plays and poems at his web site, Bacchicstage.com. He most notably seeks to restore the bawdier humor of the comedies. Theodorisis told me in an e-mail (5 May, 2010), "I believe, since competition was the name of the game with the stage, Aristophanes and other writers would bring on the live prostitutes to 'work' on the judges so as to ascertain the laurels of the first prize& but that sounds like 'corruption' and, of course, Greeks would never, ever stoop so low!"

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