Representations and Discourses in Internet Comedy

Jose Gutierrez III

A Review of **www.9gag.com**

As a popular genre, comedy—television, cinema, performance/stand-up, comic books—draws largely from difference, may it be through race, culture, nationality, gender, religion, etc. The resulting clash of representations is a bankable source of material, and at the same time, a significant site of politics of discourse. The ever-pervasive global arena that is the Internet is a constellation of expressions (e.g., via blogs) and clustering/networking (e.g., via social media). Jokes easily travel in the World Wide Web across diverse platforms. Currently, a standalone website, www.9gag.com, linked to various social media such as Facebook and Twitter, has demonstrated a strong presence in cyberspace.

Now, more than ever, new media literacies are needed. While it may seem that 9gag.com is just a means of entertainment, it is a consequential battleground of representations and discourses. Indeed, politics of difference in the form of othering particularly in race, culture, nationality, and gender can be fleshed out from these popular jokes.

This review uses Internet jokes to provide insights on the nuances of geopolitical positioning—ideological, political, economic, sociological, and cultural—of Netizens and their corresponding societies, both virtual and physical, in a similar way that the research by Purcell et al. (2010) uses disposition theory in analyzing humor as an important form of popular culture in the creation of geopolitical world views. The resultant world views observed by this review are then analyzed and discussed using media

critical concepts. According to Raney (2008), disposition theory is one of the leading explanations of why and how users enjoy their media of choice. In Purcell et al. (2010), disposition theory as put forward by Zillmann (1983) is used as a framework to understand who will regard which content as funny and how disparaging humor can be seen as amusing.

This review is also very keen on the slippages of meaning and expressions in the said jokes. This opens up a richer and more liberating analysis of discourse. It essentially enables the review to look into the nuances and prospects as regards the politics of representation and the online media. This paper also provides insights that can be used for the development of new media literacies: by 1) gaining savvy in the online media networking; 2) raising critical awareness of the political economy of globalized media; and ultimately, 3) advocating empowerment and social action online and in the real world.

Various representations and discourses are fleshed out from the jokes in 9gag.com. Major clusters include nationality, race, religion, women, and gays.

In a piece entitled "All around the world," stereotypes of various nationalities are portrayed (see Figure 1). Set within the context of a website that has the world as its target audience, this piece reinforces the stereotypes of different nationalities. Note that although 9gag.com has users from around the world, this website is still based in the United States. The dominant worldview, therefore, is largely American, including "fat American" jokes wherein Americans make fun of themselves, while, also from the commonsense American point-of-view, making fun of other nationalities. Users from other nationalities engage with this common ground to ease into the vibe of the website. Through this piece the said stereotypes are affirmed, whether or not they are true from the perspective of the actual referents.

Figure 1. Stereotypes of various nationalities. "All around the world," retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4028251.

Figure 2 exhibits jokes about women. At this point, it should be noted that the literature affirms that these jokes are not just targeted to men who may find pleasure in othering women, as Moore et al. (1987) demonstrated—in examining sexism and humor through disposition theory—that both men and women expressed a preference for humor where women were the target of the joke.
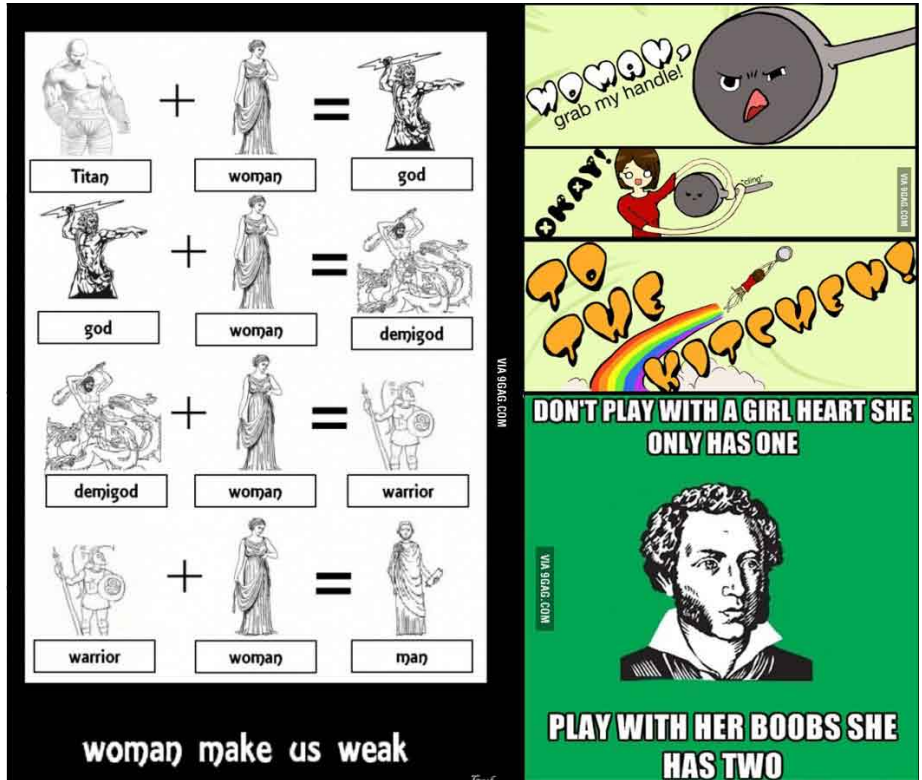
Figure 2. On women. "Just, Greek Mythology" (left), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/3977321; "That explains everything..." (upper right), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4002144; and "Such a poet..." (lower right), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4040695.

The "Just, Greek Mythology" gag draws its comedy by reinforcing the characterization of women as "the second sex." From the point of view of patriarchal ideology, women are inferior. This disavowal of women – rooted from a psychological reaction-formation – is patriarchy's way of naturalizing the world order where men hold the power. In this case, comedy becomes a safe place to suspend the social expectation of political correctness; nonetheless, the efficacy of this gag in contributing to discourse is still very salient. The "That explains everything..." gag is a part of a recurring subcluster

in 9gag.com: "women should go back to the kitchen." The underlying current of this piece is that of sarcasm; indeed, it shows the woman as a superhero but restricts her as a supermom or a super-girlfriend whose main power is to cook, ultimately, for the pleasure of her man. The "Such a poet..." gag moves from mere disavowal to objectification. Ideologically, it asserts that the dominant point of view is that of a male (the subject) and women are mere objects of this look.

Race is another form of othering. As in gender, discourse on race is critical since stereotyping can lead to prejudice, which, then can lead to discrimination.

Figure 3. On race. "Robbin' every night!" (left), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4143602; and "I eat people…" (right), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4358125.

The nuances of the jokes in Figure 3 are culturally specific to the United States. This point of view moves from mere othering to abjection. The value judgment reinforces the traditional manipulation of binary oppositions—such as white/black, majority/minority, good/evil—to serve the interest of the dominant majority as embodied by the white male American. In the case of 9gag.com, the net state of discourse on African Americans is yet to advance as other contributors to discourse such as broadcast media, cinema, news, etc., also continue to express and interact with each other to influence how the majority sees the minority, and, as crucially, how the minority construe their own identity.

The discourse on gays is significantly more fleshed out and complex in 9gag.com, as exemplified in "Every Freakiiiing Time" and "No doubt that they know" (see Figure 4). The following pieces – and, as critically, the corresponding user comments – are open to the volatility of masculinity, slippages of meaning, and fluidity of sexual identity.
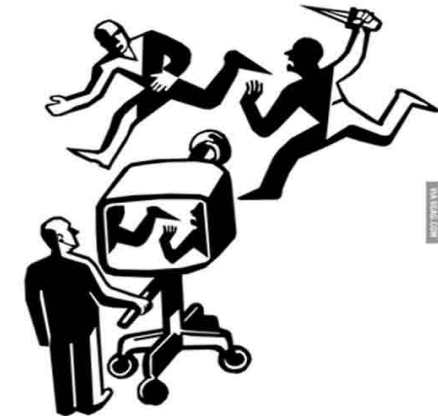
Aside from the progressive queering of gender discourse, 9gag also has a significant number of jokes that are very liberating. Various examples

Figure 4. On gays. "Every Freakiiing Time" (top), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4227371; and "No doubt that they know" (bottom), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4286467.

are exhibited in Figure 5. "We are MUSLIMS..." presents a fair perspective, something that is somewhat lacking in mainstream media. "The TV shows you what they want" promotes media literacy—a critical stance in experiencing the ubiquitous multimedia. "Girls..," by juxtaposing Mulan with other Disney princesses, directly opposes the traditional characterization of girls as weak and subservient to men. "History is repeating itself" invokes the viewers to look at the bigger picture in the fight for right to marry. Finally, "10 Reasons to Ban Gay Marriage" uses sarcasm to reinforce the freeing of discourse on gay marriage, as illustrated in the following: "[…] 2: Gay marriage will encourage people to be gay, in the same way that hanging around tall people will make you tall. […] 7: Obviously, gay parents will raise gay children, since straight parents only raise straight children. […] 8: Gay marriage is not supported by religion. In a *theocracy* like ours, the values of one religion are imposed on the entire country. That's why we have only one religion in America. […] 9: Children can never succeed without a male and a female role model at home. That's why *we as a society expressly forbid single parents to raise children*."

Comedy is a very powerful genre. The Internet is a pervasive medium. Internet comedy saliently contributes to discourse especially on women, nationality, race, religion, and gays. Internet jokes manifest the linkages,

Figure 5. Liberating and progressive pieces from the Internet. "We are MUSLIMS..." (top left), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4224567; "History is repeating itself" (bottom left), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4154645; "Girls.." (top right), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4013095; "The TV shows you what they want" (middle right), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4015509; and "10 Reasons to Ban Gay Marriage" (bottom right), retrieved from http://9gag.com/gag/4142223.

dynamics, and even contradictions between traditional patriarchal ideology and various communities—physical and virtual—in the world. There is a range of liberation in various discourses that are expressed and intertwined in Internet comedy. New media literacy should be put forward as an important component of education in the Internet Age. It will empower the Netizens in being active contributors to geopolitical, ideological, economic, sociological, and cultural discourse in the increasingly complex multimedia world that we live in. It will help us look critically at how media can influence the forming of stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and violence, on the one hand, and positive social action on the other. Media literacy is, after all, one of our most powerful weapons for world peace.

References

Moore, T. E., Griffiths, K., & Payne, B. (1987). Gender, attitudes towards women, and the appreciation of sexist humor. *Sex Roles*, 16(9/10), 521–31.

Purcell, D., Brown, M. S., & Gokmen, M. (2010). Achmed the dead terrorist and humor in popular geopolitics. *GeoJournal, 75*(4), 373-85. doi: 10.1007/s10708-009-9258-9

Raney, A. (2008). Affective disposition theories. In W. Donsbach (Ed.). *The international encyclopedia of communication*. doi: 10.1111/b.9781405131995.2008.x

Zillmann, D. (1983). Disparagement humor. In P. E. McGhee & J. H. Goldstein (eds.), *The handbook of humor research*, 3 (pp. 85–108). New York: Springer-Verlag.

JOSE GUTIERREZ III is a PhD Candidate at the Hong Kong Baptist University School of Communication and an assistant professor (on study leave) at the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication. He is also a filmmaker - portfolio website, www.JoniGutierrez.com. (corresponding author: contact@jonigutierrez.com).