

P E T E R L A N G

Politics, Humor and the Counterculture

LAUGHTER IN THE AGE OF DECAY

VWADEK P. MARCINIAK

Politics, Humor and the Counterculture discusses the post-war period (1945–1972) through the lenses of three artists: Ken Nordine, Lenny Bruce, and Firesign Theatre. Their humor cut through the hypocrisy of the Cold War and the prevailing culture and expanded our horizons. From the Beats to the peace and civil rights movements, these humorists illuminate America from their unique perspectives. Vwadek P. Marciniak highlights the poetic nature of humor as well as its insights on our political and social habits: addiction, conformity, marketing, and fear. The modern is giving way to the post-modern, the fixed to an existential attitude: humanism and humor.

Vwadek P. Marciniak received his master's degree in political philosophy from Columbia University and his doctorate in early modern intellectual history from the University of Missouri. Under the name of Dick Martin, he taught in the Humanities Department at Michigan State University (1966–1992) where he also aided in the creation of the Whole Works and Contemporary Humanities programs as well as a course on England during the Enlightenment. He is also the author of *Towards a History of Consciousness: Space, Time, and Death* (Peter Lang, 2006).

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and the
Counterculture



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt am Main • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

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In memory of
George Carlin
May 12, 1937–June 22, 2008

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Introduction

Perhaps some readers will consider a sense of humor a minor or unimportant attribute as we weigh the qualifications of those who govern the country—war, death, and taxes and all that. Frankly, I would put humor on a par with honesty, and it would seem, that both are national deficits with our current leadership—along with the budget deficits, of course.¹

The basic outline of this idea was developed when I taught the course, Contemporary Humanities as an elective at Michigan State University. For the couple of decades of this course I—with the help of students and friends—put together a enough tape to fill, with editorial commentary, some eight to ten one-hour classes as a finale for the course. Among the more interesting aspects of this experience was that none of my students had ever heard of Ken Nordine or Lenny Bruce and even if an occasional student knew of FST, they did not understand the depth and breadth of their artistically driven electric theatre.

Some of the terms used here, even with explanations, may appear rather odd and thus a few comments may be helpful.

The word *real* is troubling since so many people and organizations play massive games with it especially in contrast with *reality*. In this work the *real* will imply something fixed as in the real moment. *Reality*, on the other hand, is perceived to be a more a matter of motion as in the reality of our experiences.

Ego is what we are born with and is the driving force from birth onward and can be seen in the demand for food and changing of diapers. When a few years older we note a two- or three-year-old will make noise for attention which is a characteristic of the exercise of the ego. In an adult, the ego seeks outside reassurance for validity: “See my new car, aren’t you impressed?” You can substitute new suit, or new dress, or new job or home, or whatever. The point is that when living by one’s ego one constantly needs reassurance.

There is the other side of the coin however where as one matures they can begin to develop a sense of an interior self and thus an exterior individuality where what others may think of you really does not matter since it is you alone who is your best friend.

There is another more pristine problem that must at least be mentioned for the more thoughtful reader. Our history, i.e., history of the United States and the West, is in the throws of a massive transformation that creates serious problems for understanding the present. History has been and still is written from the point of our being in the modern world. However, a closer look at the immediate past (from approximately 1890 until today) clearly reveals massive changes in what we mean when we speak of our own world. The modern world was born about 500 years ago and has reached such a maturation that the very term modernity can be misleading if not confusing when looking at this new millennium's characteristics.

It therefore follows that one other term used throughout, that of *postmodernity*, must be put into context. This recent and confusing term has not yet been brought to bear beyond it being applied to an era that we normally refer to as modernity. This is a phenomenon of history that does not have deep roots. It is something very few comprehend. Hopefully it will be made more clear in meaning as this essay evolves. More importantly, clarity should arrive with future scholars taking into account this massive change. As an introduction, another scholar who accepts the concept has noted that "If 'post-modern' has any proper meaning at all, it should mean an advance to a new and rising sense of historicity." After all "...the end of the modern age carries within it an oceanic, though as yet hardly conscious, rise of a new meaning of history, of a historical consciousness²." Another well established and respected scholar "...the English 'idealist' historian and thinker R.C. Collingwood (sometimes referred to as a prophet of postmodernism)...wrote that history is nothing but the history of ideas."³ While this essay is about the contemporary world of humor, it is of necessity, also one regarding ideas.

Abuse and hypocrisy unfortunately reside in so many corners of the culture of rich and poor and proves to be such an intolerable condition that we have attempted to live with hoping it may not destroy us. It is this condition that makes for a new humor never quite seen before our own era. The power to go on and beyond the travail of the modern world is a unique and even positive force that can be used in nurturing and expanding humanistic qualities whenever and wherever possible. The (postmodern) humorists discussed here pre-

cisely exercise their insights beyond the traditional mass forms of comedy which only dull our long range and expansive senses. They are capable of integrating both our senses and our understanding. Learning to step back and honestly confront where we actually are may be rare but because of that it is also precious. It is this mental ability that is explored in this essay, for humor here is a slap in the face of our pretentious lives in order to catch the attention of those capable of an expanding self discovery.

There are those rare people raised in a culture that find somehow there is something better for them and their progeny: The Germans as well the Jews who saw what the beginnings of Hitler in the early 30s would mean and pulled out of that culture to live elsewhere. Many Japanese moved to this land before the war broke out again for the same sense of something better existing elsewhere. And we can suggest that the “hipsters” here in the late 40s and 50s also dropped out and moved on both intellectually and psychologically. The future belongs to those with enough imagination and willingness to move on. The counterculture was in many ways a witness of this phenomena in our own backyard.

The idea of decay in the title is not as extreme as some might think considering that it has been noted that “The sixties, which began in liberal consensus over the Cold War and civil rights, became a struggle between two apocalyptic politics that each saw the other as hellbent on the country’s annihilation.”⁴ Needless to say, Nixon and the extreme right-wing won and the United “Snakes” of America was born.

As to what happened to humor in this world of ours is answered with another question as to what happened to the U.S.A.? This can be traced to the common knowledge that something has gone very wrong: “Nearly three-quarters of Americans think U.S. society faces a ‘leadership crisis,’ according to a report by the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government late last year. It tracked a loss of faith in the people who lead business, churches, schools and the media as well as federal, state and local government.”⁵

This is a work about the presence of singularity, authenticity and a humorous sense of self so that when your disbelief is suspended, all that could never be can now become. Only the limits of your imagination can inhibit.

These are humorists, thinkers, philosophers and poets who can aid you in your personal and cultural trips where there is only one ticket from beginning to end—may you use yours wisely.

Chapter 1

The End Begins: Electric Humor Crosses Swords with Society

The willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.¹

The twentieth century has proven to be one of annihilation. From genocide to pure cruelty this was a century that was not supposed to happen. We had been enlightened by reason with faith in progress and we end up with the massive slaughter of innocents. The results were contradictory if not a denial of the concept that humans will increase their reasoning and ethical skills. By the time of the bomb, it was clear for those looking without rose colored glasses that the worst has never been more active.

In post-war America, the counterculture was a rejection of the materialistic, mechanistic and technocratic for an exploration of alternative ways of living. These alternatives included Beats, Hippies, Peaceniks, demands for equal rights for women, blacks and gays, *et al.* The artistic energy of these post-war personalities went into the streets while stepping outside the tradition of the arts. These were heady years from the 50s to the early 70s offering originality in both thought and art.²

The humor of the counterculture belongs to the world of these arts. In the genre of that counterculture let us include as examples such paintings as Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*, jazz at the hands of geniuses like Miles Davis, the new music exemplified by the Beatles' *Sgt. Peppers Lonely Heart's Club Band*, or the contemporary poetry seen in Ferlinghetti's *Constantly Risking Absurdity*. Even the classical world bombarded our ears with more of postmodern artistic sounds as were