3. Laughing All the Way to Ourselves

Why we laugh is one of life’s little mysteries; one of our uniquely human qualities. We can’t explain it entirely, completely, and satisfactorily. Humor, like queerness, eludes a precise definition. They both take us to the in-between, to a liminal place. Certainly not all humor is queer. Most isn’t. Most mass-mediated humor recapitulates heteronormativity and trades on conscious and unconscious bigotries of all sorts. But humor can be a way into queer. And queer is often a way into a laugh. Humor offers a path to queer consciousness. Queer and humor overlap in irony.

Humor, like queerness, holds a deep appreciation for the incongruities and instabilities inherent to human life. They both mine the crevices between and underneath otherwise seemingly firm foundations. They both help us see paradox. These are important measures of the kinship between humor and queerness, and perhaps why humor has been such a useful tool for queer culture reaching back from early camp to the present day. A disproportionate number of well-known women comics, for example, identify as non-straight. (Ellen DeGeneres, Sandra Bernhard, Paula Poundstone, Wanda Sykes, Rosie O’Donnell, and Margaret Cho jump immediately to mind.) Not surprisingly then, what might seem to characterize humor resonates with some of the important qualities associated with queer.
Humor, like queer, is a process: contextual, relational, even methodological. Mary Douglas says about humor,

A joke is a play upon form. It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which is in some way was hidden in the first…. (96)

THAT’S QUEER

Simon Critchley argues persuasively that what he calls “true humor” is that which “suddenly and explosively lets us see the familiar defamiliarized….” Like Douglas, Critchley says, it is a “play on form, where what is played with are the accepted practices of a given society” (10). Further, “By producing a consciousness of contingency, humor can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a critical function with respect to society” (10). So, according to Critchley, one of the basic elements of “true humor” is a denaturalizing force, one that allows us to see in a different way, even see outside of what we have always accepted as natural, and ultimately to reconceptualize what is possible.

This, of course is key to why humor is so useful in denaturalizing heterosexuality. When it challenges the terms of heteronormativity, we see the queer potential. But crucially, the conceptual leap that queer makes is produced by the fact that it has no opposite. This is central to its liberatory force, and its imprecision in meaning. The move away from understanding identities and relationships in terms of binaries is characteristic of true humor as well. Humor is a transformative force when it makes us reflect on our very natures as paradoxical beings. Critchley writes, “Humor is precisely the exploration of the break between nature and culture, which reveals the human to be not so much a category itself as a negotiation between categories” (29). It is this quality that is the meeting point