Popular Culture after Postmodernism: *Borat, Family Guy, The Office,* and the Awkwardness of Being Earnest

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This is an inquiry into why the trope of awkwardness has come to dominate post-millennial popular culture in the West.[(1)](#) It takes us from *Family Guy* (1999 to the present), to Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006), and the American iteration of *the Office* (2005 to the present) which, I argue, plot a cultural shift toward a post-postmodernism. The formal, critical, and anthropological contours of these works are illuminated by Eric Gans' Generative Anthropology and Raoul Eshelman's "performatism."[(2)](#) Formally, we find a continuation of the principal trope(s) of pop postmodernism ("rhizomic pastiche") but not in the service of postponing closure through supplementarity and deferral; rather, the limits of postmodern textualism are exposed by exploring the problems of said practices *in situ* rather than *in media*. The return to narrativity—"the awkwardness of being earnest"—marks the end of this analysis; the rest explores the generation of awkwardness and its implications as well as its historical and aesthetic contingencies.

the awkward

What do we mean when we speak of the awkward?

Here's a montage: You walk into a public bathroom to find someone naked and "showering" via a PVC pipe attached to a urinal; the only fan of your band, a middle aged married woman, stalks you and regularly tries to insinuate herself sexually into your life in plain view of her ever-present, strangely unperturbed husband; at an evening soirée, your boss remarks on the "oaky afterbirth" of the wine; at a "Dinner Society" gathering, your guest—a visiting Kazakhstani cultural emissary—returns from the bathroom with his excrement in a plastic bag (and that's before the African-American call girl shows up at the plantation style manor on Secession Dr.); after signing in to a women's health clinic, the receptionist (barely sixteen) asks if you'd like a boysenberry flavored condom, adding "My boyfriend wears them every time we have intercourse. It makes his junk smell like pie"; while performing on stage, a comedian repeatedly "screws up" and sinks steadily deeper into despair until, under the weight of his self-consciousness, the act breaks down altogether; after telling a homeless

person you have no money to spare, he reveals that he knows you're the star of a wildly successful primetime sitcom—a dialogue ensues where you try to justify withholding money because the denomination of the bills you're carrying is greater than what you want to give; a magician begins his act by reading five pages of ads from your local newspaper.(3)

It is hard to give a hard and fast definition, but perhaps the one involving the "Kazakhstani cultural emissary" is the most illustrative of the awkwardness we'll be examining. This catastrophically gauche event comes from Sacha Baron Cohen's *Borat: Cultural Learnings For Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. Borat Sagdiyev is ostensibly a Kazakhstani journalist touring America with a film crew in order to compile a documentary for Kazakhstan's "Ministry of Information." In reality it's a sham: Borat is played by a British comic (Cohen); the crew is led by an experienced American director (Larry Charles, of *Seinfeld* fame); the movie that emerges is edited to conform to a narrative arc; et cetera.(4) But we cannot say that it is *entirely* a sham—there are contrived aspects to the film, but the crew really is there to document the spontaneous realities provoked by Cohen. Thus the scene we're concerned with, the one on Secession Dr. mentioned above, is for all intents and purposes a dinner. Nevertheless, it is a complicated dinner to unpack.

We, the audience, view the event through what might be thought of as the outermost frame. We are aware of Borat's fictionality, but those sitting at the table with Cohen/Borat think they're being filmed as themselves, eating dinner with a foreign guest. This pretense effectively blinds the guests to our "presence." The fundamental layer of awkwardness arises from this asymmetry. For *us* the cameras are a one-way mirror; we become a sort of voyeur, privy to a situation that necessarily excludes us. For those *within* the frame, for those being observed, the pervasive awkwardness is the novelty of the situation (i.e., Borat and the camera crew) and the cultural divide. As for the former concern, the cameras no doubt add a bit of performance anxiety to the proceedings, but they also lend a gravity and legitimacy to them: we are filming because you are important. As for the "cultural divide," the common understanding that some of the interaction will be "lost in translation" is essential to the success of the encounter (as understood by Cohen and Larry Charles) as it expands the envelope of permissible or "forgivable" behavior.(5) When the guests are introduced to Borat, for example, and he leans in to kiss the men not only on each cheek but on the lips, we know that were an American (or someone from England, for that matter) to try the same thing they would likely not be tolerated as Borat is. This feature of his persona serves to get him into a given context. After that the order of business is to build resentment by behaving, in varying degrees, exactly as he shouldn't. (This technique is made explicit by interspersing the dinner with clips of his time with an etiquette coach. After each "point" in the lesson, we cut to the dining room where he proceeds in the face of the norm.) When things turn ugly, the camera crew—formerly an implicit endorsement of their behavior and assumptions—turns into something terrifying. Not only are the hosts' efforts to behave "naturally," "politely," and "properly" strained by Cohen's transgression, they're being *filmed*.

All that said, the unwitting "actors" here acquit themselves with civility and patience in the face of cruelty and crudity. When someone explains to Borat that he is *retired*, Borat commends the group: "is a very good [sic] you allow a retard to eat with you in the same place." Later, he compliments the women sitting on either side of him—"in my country, they would go crazy for these two"—only to add just a beat later, gesturing loosely at the third woman at the end of the table: "not so much." When excusing himself to go to the restroom, he forgoes euphemism completely and drags it out as long as possible, maximizing the disruption of the request. And when he returns, asking the hostess what he should do with this plastic bag of feces, the dinner shockingly manages to shamble on (after a lesson in toilet paper). Eventually there is a knocking at the door. Borat opens it to find Luenell, a black prostitute he called shortly after his arrival. Now everything comes apart at the seams. The hostess (who is white, along with all the guests and the butler) barely manages to cope with the situation. Luenell, civilly, observes that "yall're havin' a dinner party." The hostess barely spits out "well we *were*, I—I don't know what exactly all we were doing. It's getting very very late…. It's getting very very late; it's time that, you know, we were ending our dinner party and everything." Borat asks if Luenell can join them for dessert and is met with outright scorn. Cut to the next shot, footage from a camera held while running, where we hear someone say "the sheriff is on his way." Borat has the last word: "Why you call police? Did the retard escape?"

With this scene we have begun to unfurl the awkward tapestry at hand: cultural dissonance (whether in the form of foreigners, or through the naïve, the culturally isolated); direct engagement with cultural taboos, mores, and folkways; the mockumentary mode (discussed later); and the singular urgency of the earnest and the awkward. In short, encounters that are "parasitic" on the normal, equalitarian exchange of signs; encounters that occur beyond the normative scripts of social interaction.

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With the help of Eric Gans' Generative Anthropology and Raoul Eshelman's "performatism" we can begin to hammer out a workable definition of the awkward from this as yet unrefined material. Proceeding anthropologically, the scene can be cast as a ritual—the "Southern High Society Dinner." Borat has been invited to witness this legacy cultural event. I say "legacy" because it is predominantly driven by nostalgia rather than any real community; it exists by virtue of and for the sake of a script. This codification is to Cohen's advantage: the more sharply defined the rules of the encounter—the more *about* rules the encounter is—the more purchase there is in leveraging against them. Adding to that torque is his outsider status. Though he is foreign to the social milieu, though his status as mere *observer* should go without saying, he's granted a modicum of equality for a number of reasons: the strictures of political correctness that arose alongside the discursive obsession of postmodernism, the humanistic basis of modern civil society, and his ability to speak English. The banality of these "reasons" is precisely what gives Cohen's comedic strategy its

savage edge: in the guise of Borat, he exercises his originary freedom in the service of creating as much resentment as possible. In other words, he is using a quality of peripherality to test the coherence of the center.

This is one of the fundamental aspects of Cohen's perverse shtick. As Borat, he mounts increasingly aggressive provocations on the community in order to call its inclusive bluff. His presence precipitates a struggle to articulate the limits of acceptable behavior and belief in order to push those around him into acts of *ex*clusion. This is the reason that he brings a bag of his shit back to the dinner table. Each taboo move he makes is a mere token of this ultimate gesture. It is as brilliant as it is crude, or it is brilliant *because* it is crude—or perhaps it would be better altogether to say that it occurs beyond such categories. I call this his "ultimate gesture" precisely because it is so inconceivable: by crossing the threshold of the symbolic into the real he implies violence, and the interaction threatens to collapse along the horizon line of the human. The community is paralyzed by two paradoxical yet instinctual responses. One is the tension of upholding the wider social expectation of acceptance of difference, the other is a localized impulse for rejection of difference. Cohen milks the former for all its worth, yet he is counting just as much on his inevitable expulsion. He knows that the group cannot allow him to get away with offering *anything* in lieu of a meaningful sign, for if the guests legitimize any gesture that Borat makes they render the boundaries which define their social and individual identities meaninglessly inclusive. This struggle is unambiguously post-postmodern, as it derives its significance from opposition to dominant postmodern attitudes—often derogatorily labeled "relativistic"—regarding the enforcement of tradition and social norms.

Along with this fundamental antagonism he problematizes the assumed roles of centrality and peripherality in the context of the dinner. In Gans' originary analysis of classical comedy and tragedy, a distinction is made between the tragic figure who "defends the center 'in all seriousness,' without for all that seeking esthetic centrality," and a comic one, who appears on stage yet "seeks neither." In this arrangement, a paradoxical centrality is spun around the comic figure, producing resentment that is dispelled through laughter. Though it may involve startling transgressions or destabilizations, the narrative arc of comedy culminates in the figure's return to the anonymity of the periphery, affirming the center's legitimacy (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 145-7).

Borat follows the schema to a point, depending on how you look at him, seeing as he is framed twice: once for us, the movie theatre audience, and once for those being filmed. For us in the theatre, *he* is the central figure. But his centrality is, like the arrangement of classical comedy, a paradox: in acting as though he is utterly oblivious to the context, he displays his deep understanding of it. In turn, those around him come to be seen as pathetically oblivious and, eventually, painfully unaware of their complicity in it. On the other side of the screen, for those who are close enough to Borat to smell his stinking suitjacket, the situation is at first similar to the classic comedic dynamic. But there is one

crucial twist: instead of being haplessly yoked with centrality, Borat *earnestly and unrepentantly monopolizes it.* If you are face to face with him, Borat's "paradoxical centrality" is agonizingly disorienting, an assault on your very bearing in the world. It is impervious to the power of laughter to designate it as absurd. Laughter, that which should reassert the customary order of things, becomes a hollow echo of that familiarity. There is no return to the periphery and anonymity with Borat; there is no return to the community's textual foundation, only mute horror, paralyzed incredulity.

Cohen's distinct comedic intuition is in effect a problematization of "*habitus*," minimally defined as the "coherent mode of being" afforded by the emission of the first, conflict-averting sign and the relationship it establishes between the sacred and the human (Gans, "Mimetic Paradox" 22). This individual coherence is tied to the communal and vice-versa, and is maintained by means of narrative, the (instantiated, temporal-spatial) exercise of originary freedom in order to re-present and re-affirm the center's (atemporal, universal) "gift to humanity," its role of balancing individual desire with social stability (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 107, 110). *Habitus* is initially opposed to "*non-habitus*," the volatile, pre-linguistic state of appetitive conflict. But after the originary scene, *non-habitus* is the *threat* of social disintegration, whether in the form of an individual divorced from the whole, or in the whole ceasing to exist. Cohen's routine aims at *non-habitus*, is a zero-degree assault on the social order, characterized as it is by absolute transgression of any and all boundaries: those imposed by civility, tradition, history, or context generally. The characteristic feature of this sort of comedy is its rapid escalation of the stakes to existential levels. Either the dining society forcefully ejects Borat from the table, unleashing the chaotic force of violence, or the dinner collapses because the "center," the narrative integrity of the scene, has collapsed. By frustrating the social narrative, Borat tears at the established text around which a community is organized; he elicits an incredulity along the lines of that which astronomers might feel were they to track a comet moving through our solar system that behaved as though the sun didn't exist.

With *Borat*, collapse is unavoidable by design. In the end the only thing you can do to maintain your dignity, your *habitus*, is to eject him. There is no peaceful reconciliation with Borat. If you grant him entrance into your community, he will compromise it morally and ethically. If you laugh in disbelief, you've only more clearly defined the boundaries of transgression. If you seek to counter him through invocations of centrality, good luck—he's already problematized any familiar loci of centrality by introducing his own center/periphery: himself and the production crew. If you move to expel him, you're likely approaching the use of violence, in which case the social breakdown is equally the result of your own transgression against the social order.(6)

So far we have identified the anthropological points of articulation to this cultural paradigm. Raoul Eshelman's "performatism" is the aesthetic backdrop to the proceedings, providing us with a meaningful framework in which we can situate what have so far been senseless acts.

It doesn't allow us to absolve Borat or nullify the trauma he has caused, but it does reveal the redemptive potential of his transgressions.

At the heart of Eshelman's founding essay on performatism are subjects who, in the face of the "ever expanding field of the postmodern" attempt to preserve their agency and identity through holistic, "context-disrupting" acts of "self-fashioning" (1, 8). In order for individuals to successfully "transcend" their surroundings, they must overcome the postmodern forces of "dispersal, deconstruction and proliferation" which would otherwise dissolve them in a "web of paradoxical citations and cross-references" (2, 11). This requires "opacity," a "massive denseness" predicated on actions and utterances so radically "simple" (naïve, earnest, oblivious) that they "defuse any suspicion that [they are] simulating or insincere" (27).

But the line between transcendence and solipsism is as thin as the edge of a coin. Borat is our case in point, demonstrating that someone who cultivates these qualities must cope with a specific, anthropologically rooted resentment: that which a community levels against "foreign bodies" in their milieu (Eshelman 8). But this isn't a problem for him; "transcendence" or "integrity" in the face of a deconstructive sociocultural environment are not the ends he seeks. In this sense Sacha Baron Cohen embodies a paradoxically insincere approach to the awkwardness of being earnest. His persona behaves earnestly but in an obliviously hostile fashion. Even if this weren't the case, he is merely a character—there is no person there to *possess* beliefs, nor is there a figure that can be believed in. His opacity is purely formal and carries with it no transformative charge. If anything it is an almost *postmodern* opacity: he is not struggling *against* the incursion of exogenous forces *but is an opaque figure constituted by them*. He is an entropic force, so to speak, increasing disorder in a closed system through the perpetual introduction of scurrilous elements (a sexist comment, personal oversharing, an insult, human excrement...).

Yet this is perfectly symptomatic of the present sociocultural moment. Unlike Eshelman, we are not concerned with *how* or *whether* performatist subjects achieve transcendence. Rather, we are interested in the dynamic underlying the performatist possibility, the dynamic that characterizes what I call "awkward" works: the movement from postmodernism, which "institutionalized evil—continuous boundary transgression," to the post-millennial project of "institutionaliz[ing] the good—the one-time, firm drawing of borders" (Eshelman 9). We'll begin with chronotopes, the minimally performatist aspect of Cohen's *oeuvre*. As opposed to postmodernism, which is locked into a decentered mode of traces, deferral, and dispersal, performatism emphasizes discrete, spatiotemporal chronotopes, structured to allow subjects a "choice between possibilities or even repeated choices between possibilities" (Eshelman 10). Our dinner scene is definitely a specimen of this species. But in this case the chronotope is not there for the originator of opacity or for those caught within it more generally, *but for the ironic, postmodern audience watching in the theatre.*

Borat's opacity necessitates the drawing of boundaries under intense external scrutiny. For those sitting around the table with him, the production crew is the definitive frame for their behavior. It also establishes the stakes: though the diners are preoccupied with their agency as implicated in the situation at hand, unfolding ambiguously in the present, the cameras gesture at an atemporal, "universal" realm of *critical* agency. Thus there is pressure to behave according to a sort of categorical imperative. We, the audience, stand just beyond that line; we inhabit that "universal" realm, outside (that particular) time and space; we watch the events unfold clearly, un-ambiguously, and voyeuristically. Our relationship to the scene is the same as that of a postmodernist to a text: we are above and beyond the frame (and framing itself) and consequently we are "in" on it all. We can endlessly critique and mock the guests' futile, fumbling attempts to impose normalcy on the dinner, to save face, to "correct" or stand up to Borat's blithe belligerency—and we get to do all this with the pure conscience of someone with no obligation to or culpability for the scene. Yet just as Borat's merciless opacity short-circuits the normal functioning of the dinner, it also frustrates aspects of our postmodern position: *we cannot ironically defer our tension by dispersing him through supplements and traces.* We must—unbearably—take everything at face value. This discomfort is a visceral experience, dragging us into the temporal mode that traps those within the frame, confronting us with the reality of situations that offer only immediate, binding praxis. For the audience, the problem posed by this moment in *Borat* is first how to balance the dignity of these individuals as framed locally by this circumstance—in particular, that dignity which we erode by our privileged understanding of their situation—and, as a higher-order concern, in relation to wider cultural and historical tensions. The former asks the postmodernist to abandon their aloof, deconstructive perch; the latter requires that they retain the unmatched perspective afforded by it.

The sociohistoric peril specific to this scene is America's bigoted past. A subtle undercurrent, admittedly, but undeniable all the same. The opening shot of the scene is a signpost: "Secession Dr." This is the "private drive" in Birmingham, Alabama on which "Magnolia Mansion," the home of the dinner society, sits. Immediately we are primed to be sensitive to issues of race. And while Borat's behavior is not exclusively calibrated to evoke racism, his *presence* there taps into this deep, highly targeted trauma. The specter haunting "Southern Pride" and "Southern Hospitality" alike is that of slavery, the Civil War, of Jim Crow and segregation—that is, of a community defining itself based (in part) upon the wholesale exclusion of human beings. So when Borat calls an escort service to arrange for a black prostitute to arrive during the dinner, he is simply gesturing at the symbolic whole of the alterity—Luenell, *the* historic figure of Southern resentment—he will be cultivating piecemeal.(7) This scene, this chronotope serves as a sort of allegory for the anthropological activity of communal definition problematized by specifically postmodern anxieties. Though the integrity of an individual or a group may be at stake, there is a hesitancy to act for the simple fact that each "stand" you make in relation to Borat closes off other avenues of action, narrows your available attitudes to the scene, and/or leaves you increasingly exposed to a universe of incriminating external traces.

This is part and parcel to what Gans sees as *the* postmodern anxiety: the particular versus the universal; the narrative versus the textual (*Originary Thinking* 100). It is also the impasse—embraced by Sacha Baron Cohen and Larry Charles, but not overcome—at which performatism and Generative Anthropology emerge as viable cultural-aesthetic contingencies. But how did we arrive here, and what implications does it have for the post-millennial?

Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" gets at the issue as framed by Gans but with different terminology (*The Postmodern Condition* xxiv). Both formulations depend on a problematized agency in the world. Lyotard, writing thirty years after the fall of the Nazi Reich and in the midst of the Cold War, certainly had no shortage of metanarratives—teleological worldviews totalizing human experience—to support his case. Coupled with those historical warnings were the revelations of post-structuralism, which transformed the sociocultural sphere into a roiling, amorphous mass of suspect discursive flows competing for propagation. Not until this moment in history, for example, could the utterance of a simple pronoun ("he") implicate you in a vast, ancient system of oppression. Beyond ideology and sociolinguistics, globalization provided real-world analogs to these metaphysical perils. A cliché that comes readily to mind is that of the first-world suburbanite buying a pair of shoes produced by child labor in a third-world country.

In lieu of metanarrative thinking, Lyotard suggests we adopt a meta-position in which the individual is a node in a network: "one is always located at a post through which various kinds of information pass. . . . No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent" (15). This conception of subjectivity is a bit complicated. "Your" viewpoint becomes a third-order relationship to reality. First there is the horizontal, appetitive mode where an action, utterance, or desire is considered. Secondly the impulse is resitutated: what initially seemed to be an internal, private, and authentic phenomena comes to be seen as external, embedded within a determinative cultural system. Lastly there is the simultaneous consideration of both, the postmodernist hovering above and beyond the frame.

"Meta" naturally becomes the postmodern buzzword. This meta-epistemology and meta-ontology necessitate skepticism, hyper self-consciousness, and irony. "I" becomes an oblique, ephemeral assemblage of strategically subverted norms and discursive flows and the unblinking juxtaposition of high/low, profane/sacred. Though there is still a distinct individual agency, it becomes a fundamentally ironic exercise: the freedom of the postmodern subject—overwhelmed by the newly revealed discursive universe, who seriously considers their time to be the "end of history"—is merely that of selection: "postmodernism conceives of the only relevant experience as the metaexperience of representation. Its works can be dated only on the secondary level of the choice of mixture of styles; it refuses

the Sisyphean task of creating yet another latest style" (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 214-5).

Lyotard summarizes: "each of us knows that our *self* does not amount to much" (15). Accompanying this statement is a footnote, a quotation from J. Bouveresse's commentary on Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. "The world is one in which lived events have become independent of man. . . . It is a world of happening, of what happens without its happening to anyone, and without anyone's being responsible" (90). In the transition to postmodernism, the *subject becomes translucent:* like light passing through a pane of glass, the glass is perceived not in and of itself but in the momentary bending of the light. No surprise then that this new aesthetic epoch with its emphasis on opacity is unsettling. An "I" that privileges its own perspective or legitimacy over another is shockingly, unbearably *earnest*, a quality possessed only by someone who has missed the entire arc of the current sociohistoric moment.(8)

This dichotomy between the ironic and the earnest is artificial. In practice they may play out on their own, separate continua, but in principle they exist in obverse/reverse relationship. The tension between the two is akin to that found between the narrative and the textual—both arise from paradoxes, from artificially imposed constraints, and both expose fundamental limitations of the postmodern mode. In the originary scene, an aborted gesture of appropriation reveals the textual realm, ushering in the new human era of signification. This departure from interrupted temporality to the timeless vertical plane is incomplete as a sequence, as a mode of being, until the two axes are united through the newly structured, newly meaningful act of appropriation and distribution. Though we can discuss them as "separate," textuality and narrativity are mutually co-extensive—even though the former "precedes" the latter, each is revealed simultaneously in/through the other (Gans,*Originary Thinking* 106). We should think of this "division" between appetitive or desiring gestures (narrativity) and the paradoxical contemplation of sign, object, and desire (textuality) as the same that exists between earnestness and irony. Earnestness is a naïve or "untroubled" assertion of a particular "reading" of a given text; (postmodern) irony is able to consider the reading, but is unwilling/unable to defend its legitimacy in the face of any and all other readings. In this light, the earnest becomes a purely *narrative* impulse. It is that initial, uncomplicated temporal-spatial gesture of desire; in the dynamic of "love and resentment," it is *all love*, oblivious to the complications of the textual moment. Irony is all *resentment*, the preferred mode of the "post-historical" subject who is all too aware of "the paradoxicality of the esthetic" and is therefore disabused of any capacity "for illusion … relying instead on the representations of earlier, less sophisticated observers" for their (pseduo)narrative moves (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 218). This allows the postmodernist to dodge "the anxiety that [they] too live in a historical moment that will some day be seen from without"—a historical moment that they are caught helplessly in, unable to transcend, where being seen from without is necessarily to be *judged* from without (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 214). The awkwardness of being earnest is the confrontation of this anxiety; the way through is the reconciliation of earnestness and irony and the transition from

translucency to opacity.

Discomfort with the particular, an uneasy relationship with narrativity, an increasingly expansive cultural universe to cite, and a predilection for irony culminate in the fundamental aesthetic trope of the postmodern and the post-postmodern. The common denominator here is an emphasis on *selection from* and *deployment of* the autonomous cultural elements that swirl around the individual. It follows, then, that pastiche and the rhizome have come to define much of the epoch's esthetic output, from eclecticist architecture to music sampling to Quentin Tarantino. Pastiche—the transition from a belief in normative practices to a new mode of "blank" or "neutral" parody with no "ulterior motive," "speech in a dead language"—is one aspect, as its employment divorces parts from their contextual wholes (Jameson 1963). But pastiche may very well just have been a prelude to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. Though we are just now discussing it by name, the rhizome has already been identified in this paper by effect: Borat as an "entropic" force; Borat as introducing "scurrilous elements" into the dinner milieu. As will become increasingly clear, any account of this transitional moment must also be an account of the rhizome.

Like the post-structural, the rhizome proceeds ontologically and epistemologically from the textual: there are no "beginnings" or "endings" in a rhizome, only a "middle from which it grows and always overspills" (Deleuze and Guattari 1605). Consequently narrative movements are accidents of the system, having little or nothing to do with its essence; they are derived from a formula "$(n – 1)$": the particular ("the One") is always subtracted from the multiplicity "(n)," and all particulars themselves link back to the multiplicity (Delueze and Guattari 1605). Pastiche abolishes history and condenses everything into a single (horizontal) dimension; the rhizome provides for the infinite expansion. In the face of history's genocidal metanarratives and deconstruction's relentless assault on narrative integrity, these tropes grant access to a textual realm of uncompromised "indeterminacy" from which any attempts to pursue a particular, bounded interpretation come to be situated on a continuum of "authoritarian manipulation[s]" of the pure textual realm (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 110).

These superstructural aspects are outgrowths of the internet, the formative infrastructural development of the 21st century. The internet is a virtual network of databases ("nodes" in the parlance of computer science) where time and space, "beginning," "end," and "meaning" are all equally irrelevant. To access it requires a "blank" frame, a web browser.(9) From there you invoke a website, which presents you with an array of content and links that you can pursue in any order, any fashion you see fit.(10) We can also find traces of Lyotard in this medium of pure information. A "bottom-up" approach to reading the internet produces sites like Reddit.com.(11) Reddit is composed entirely of user-posted links, which are then "liked," "disliked," and commented on by other users. It provides no content of its own. The main page is a list of the fastest-rising or most "liked" links and

changes dynamically according to user participation. Alternately, you can create a free account at Reddit.com and organize the main page however you would like. In effect, you are aggregating individuals into discursive networks. It is unclear as to what scale Lyotard was referring to when he somberly declared that "each of us knows that our *self* does not amount to much," but there is a lurking contradiction in that utterance: does he mean in relation to a city, a nation, a continent? The entire sweep of history, the evolution of human beings, the span of a generation? In any case, the figure who unburdened us of the notion of the metanarrative seems (in this utterance, at least) strikingly unsympathetic to the potentials of the micronarratives which, in large part, constitute the internet—memes, viral videos, and sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Reddit being key examples. The internet as hybridized infrastructure and superstructure both supports Lyotard's (30-year-old) arguments and, in relation to our own inquiry, sharpens them: the "network" that we as "nodes" find ourselves embedded in is undeniably rhizomic.

These developments are far from theoretical and culturally peripheral. I contend that they have come to form the core of contemporary popular culture. This claim is borne out by what I argue is the (pop) postmodern text *par excellence*: Fox's *Family Guy*.(12) This immensely popular(13) program wouldn't exist without this postmodern "rhizomic pastiche" (which, naturally, finds its perfect medium in the flat, virtual plane of the television screen) and a vast body of "ready-made" bracketed culture and history to mash together. Nor would it exist without a large audience comfortable with and fluent in the postmodern aesthetic. And though my characterization of "rhizomic pastiche" has so far been negative, it is only because now, after its maturation in the sphere of popular culture, we can see where it dead-ends.

Though almost any episode would do, we'll examine the "Former Life of Brian" (2006). In it, the family dog, Brian (who can be thought of as a person for ease of discussion) returns to a past sweetheart (a human) and finds she has a son she claims is his. Eventually the son, Dylan, comes to stay with Brian and the rest of the family. In one scene, Dylan walks into the family room where Peter Griffin (the titular family guy) and his wife, Lois, are watching television. He throws a vase at the wall.

Peter: Somethin' on your mind, son?

Dylan: Shut up dude! You're just a fat old bastard!

Peter: Well… not to get technical sir, but *you* are the bastard! Nyuk nyuk nyuk!

[Cued by the repartee, the frame changes to a black and white title card that reads: "Peter Griffin's Front Parlour Ribticklers." Old-timey music, like you would hear in a silent movie, plays as a dapper gentleman tells Peter, dressed and mustachioed in the style of the early twentieth century, a joke. We return to the Griffin family room.]

Dylan: I hate you all! I didn't ask to be born! If I had a gun I would kill you all!

Peter [giddily]: Did you hear that Lois? Now we know what to get him for Christmas! *Oooh* I love the holidays.

Lois: Brian! You have got to get Dylan under control. He's terrorizing our whole family!

Peter: Yeah, you wouldn't believe what he did to Meg yesterday. He made her watch the other 178 hours of Monty Python stuff that isn't funny or memorable.

[Scene change. Meg Griffin is tied to a chair, seated before a TV screen which we can't see. A shrill British male voice comes from the TV: "I have a pet hedgehog named Zippy. And I shall walk her to town. And each time my foot hits the ground, I shall say *Boing! Boing! Boing!*"]

[....]

[Later. Peter walks into the kitchen. He has a mohawk.]

Peter: Hey Lois, is the air conditioning on? I just woke up from a nap and I feel awful drafty.

Lois: Peter, we don't have air conditioning.... [Turning around, sees Peter.] Oh my god Peter, look! [Produces a mirror.]

Peter: Ah damnit Dylan, what the hell! Well, thank god I'm full of play-doh. [Grunting noises; play-doh squeezes out of Peter's head to replace the missing hair.]

There is no depth to something like this, nothing to take away, only a gratuitous deployment of the rhizome to observe. As a result much of the humor and even the narrative comes about through a sort of randomness which is more concerned with the number of connections it can make than reckoning with the distances between them. The audience for *Family Guy* is stimulated by the associative acrobatics taking place, tasked by the show with the open-and-closed game of place-the-referents. And though the series can cover an astonishingly broad cultural ground, throwing every conceivable combination(14) of styles, celebrities, tones, moments in history, literary references, familiar locales, stereotypes (et cetera) at the viewer, it *never has anything to say*.(15)

This is the high mark of pop postmodernism, the decadent apogee of the rhizome's trajectory into the upper limits of the atmosphere. Signifier begets signifier begets signifier, forgets; (n-1) spirals endlessly out into the ether. *Borat* is the vertiginous reassertion of earth's gravity: every foot, each inch we rose above that raw, ineluctable centrality will be accounted for in our return to it. But the rhizome doesn't burn up in its reentry, nor is it

altered or diminished in effect. Landing in Scranton, Pennsylvania, it simply takes the form of a man, the regional manager of a paper distribution company and star of the American version of *The Office*: Michael Scott.

The change in environment is profound. *Family Guy* provided for unproblematic application *in media*; *The Office* offers nothing but the simultaneously banal and fraught arena of everyday life. The task of dealing with the rhizome *in situ* is the central concern of popular post-millennialism. Blending chronotopic constraints and opacity with the rhizome is the big bang of this post-millennial universe, the fundamental source of the nascent aesthetic's disparate, swirling energy. Generative anthropology reins in the chaos, providing the principles for those constraints, guiding inchoate forms alternately toward stability and higher-order complexity. *The Office* is among the first of these formations and allows us to finally outline the critical import of all this awkwardness: the presentation of opaque moments/figures in order to draw attention to the characteristics, functions, legitimacy, locations, and representatives of centrality in relation to accompanying peripheries. This approach proceeds "micronarratively," or with an eye toward the performative aesthetic of discrete, local events that necessitate closure, whether in the face of corrupt discursive flows or for the renewal of "human relationships through love" (Eshelman 7).

a critique of pure awkwardness

Borat's dinner scene and *The Office*'s office spaces aspire to present what Walter Benjamin called the "orchid in the land of technology," that "sight of the immediate" brought about by means of the utmost virtuality (233). By this he meant the goal of making a finished film appear as though it were footage captured out in the world as opposed to being created hodgepodge in a movie studio. Today, we find that the effect—immediacy—remains the same, but the means have been inverted: the energy that previously went into making the studio and filming apparatus transparent is now channeled toward making the studiocraft *as visible as possible*. Hence we have the shaky-cam, now a ubiquitous trope of all film and television, high and low; we have low-hanging booms, penetrating what was before the absolute domain of the frame, ineluctably joining the beyond with the within; we drift away from highly scripted interaction toward the spontaneity of on-set improvisation and ditch the canned audience laugh-tracks; we have the actors in *The Office* holding doors for camera operators, pushing past them in nervous haste to evade their lenses, or failing to appear where the camera expects them to (then caught briefly through the blinds, barely in focus, embracing in the parking lot; looking up, seeing the camera, fleeing).

These stylistic tendencies have caught on because they are at once startling and familiar to a postmodern constituency in flux. Revealing a camerawoman, for instance, embodies decidability *and* undecidability. On the one hand it reveals an aspect of the work's creation, emphasizing temporality. On the other it is a trace of textual openness: we could be seeing the scene from *that* camera, possibly revealing an aspect that problematizes our current

understanding. The "frame" through which we view everything is never allowed to (seem to) disappear or to totalize the experience; the work is constantly "in progress." In essence the mockumentary approach minimizes Benjamin-like concerns over the work as representation and maximizes those of the interpersonal, the social, and the communal. In turn—and in performatist fashion—the frame becomes an issue primarily for those caught *within* it rather than for those peering through it. With *Borat* the observed must necessarily remain in the dark as to who is watching them and why; with *The Office* the actors interact with the fourth wall as a matter of course.(16) Complementing these techniques for contriving transparency is the familiarity of the setting; vying only with a nuclear family's kitchen table, a non-descript officeplex might be the most ubiquitous setting in mainstream Western culture. It presents the viewer with the mundane *mise en scène* of the cubicle, the conference room, the water cooler, the printer-copier, the receptionist's desk… This is a stroke of (pop) brilliance, for it realizes that from the most familiar, controlled, and "impersonal" corporate zones the most devastating awkwardness can erupt. And by choosing an explicitly hierarchical setting, it foregrounds the anthropological issues of centrality/peripherality and community.

Community is one of the eternal "problems" of the show; that is, like having dinner with Borat, there is something (potentially) fundamentally awkward about throwing a heterogeneous group of individuals into a pre-established network of roles and relationships. To drive the point home, and to present us with a sort of microcosm of America, the cast is fairly diverse and rife with potential conflict from inception: Andy Bernard, the white, early-thirties fratboy Ivy-leaguer with an anger management problem; Kelly Kapoor, the twenty-something Indian-American airheaded pop culture obsessive; Stanley Hudson, the stodgy African-American salesman; Oscar Martinez, the gay Mexican-American accountant; Creed Bratton, the white, drugged-out ex-rock-and-roller(17); Meredith Palmer, a white, dazed, over-the-hill alcoholic single mother; Phyllis Lapin-Vance, a white woman in her mid-fifties dealing with a (late) mid-life crisis; Angela Martin, a white, no-nonsense anachronistic catloving buzzkill. . . While each "character" tends toward the opaque at one time or another, Dwight Schrute is the show's spokesman for it. Dwight, who goes by "assistant to the regional manager" (technically, he is only a salesman), also checks the box for a marginal figure who earnestly pursues centrality. He is constantly grubbing for power along the strictly delineated lines of office hierarchy. The basis for most of his conniving behavior in the first and second seasons is his struggle to convince Michael to remove the word "to" in the title above. More generally Dwight's earnestness is seen in how seriously he takes everything; or, rather, everything he takes an interest in. This generates opacity in a consistently idiosyncratic way. To rattle off a short list: Dwight drives a personally restored 1987 Pontiac Trans Am, makes traditional corn husk dolls, is a consummate outdoorsman, lives on his family's ancestral beet farm, is a local volunteer sheriff's deputy, and shows up at pick-up basketball games wearing a t-shirt from an anime convention and an ostentatious face-guard. Like all opaque figures, Dwight frustrates the colonizing and assimilatory nature of the cultural matrix in that he is not found on a familiar

"map" but nevertheless presents a stable persona. He embodies an earnest, unflinching narrativity: not only is Dwight unafraid of imposing one "reading" of a text ("culture" very broadly put) for fear of parochialism or "authoritarianism," he is *defined* by this behavior. For the postmodernist, Dwight is "irremediably tainted [by] the naïveté inherent in [his] historical illusion of immediacy" (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 218). In the performatist era, these characteristics lend the subject a sort of beauty. But Dwight is not *beautiful*. The flipside to his particular individuality is alienation of his coworkers. Though Dwight may never quite realize it, his self-legitimization occurs almost exclusively on the communal periphery. In exercising his originary freedom he is unconcerned with the communal valences of his actions; despite the fact that he seeks "centrality," he can conceive of it only as a narcissistic projection of his own desires.

If Dwight is a sort of flawed potential beauty, Michael Scott is walking disaster who occasionally sparks moments of transcendence. Michael's role as the branch manager is to deal with the disparate elements present in the office; he is there to square all the human angles, to justify any inherent or "necessary" asymmetries for the sake of the business. Unfortunately he is glib: thrown into the center, he understands it as the source of all significance but has no idea how to fulfill its responsibilities. Michael is therefore the source of *the Office*'s fundamental anxiety; he is the post-postmodern problem with narrativity personified. Being the center, he is the source of communal legitimacy and cohesion; the periphery's "freedoms" arise from him, their activities are made meaningful by their necessary "return" to him. But his glibness compromises this process and the periphery is forced to find a way to "return" to the center individually and communally in *spite* of its failings. They do this for the sake of their dignity, their sanity, and their identity; they do it because his very being is a perpetual gesture toward a "return to originary chaos," the "terror of the potential disintegration of the entire social order" (Gans, "Morality," 17). The center is structurally there, but it is empty.

Or empty of anything but Michael's id. Like Dwight, the alpha and omega of his existence is his own desire. Unlike Dwight, he occupies the center, a space which functions on the eternal deferral of desire. Michael's tragic aspect arises precisely from this bind. He languishes in a peculiarly postmodern hell, racked by "the paradox of the subject who wishes both to consume the [central] object and to withhold it indefinitely from consumption, but who cannot imagine it 'undecidably' because for the desiring subject the distinction between the inaccessible and the consumable cannot be bridged" (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 218). Unlike successful performatist subjects, who transcend the "symbolic order of language" with its "chain[s] of signifiers" and "distracting puns" by wielding it as a "massive instrument" in the service of their needs and desires, Michael is dwarfed by it (Eshelman 9). As a result his utterances and actions have the *feel* or the *style* of postmodern humor ("oaky afterbirth"; "It is my job to profligate great ideas"; "I'm like Superman and the people who work here are like the citizens of Gotham City") but are lacking the crucial "meta" sensibility which would signal an ironic intent. He wants to be on

the same level as his audience—and is usually convinced that this is the case—but fails to realize that he's on the wrong side of a one-way mirror. On the one hand, Michael is locked into a postmodern mode of textual centrality: supplementing (bewilderingly), referencing (inappropriately), universalizing resentment, and frustrating closure. On the other, he yearns for human connection, for closure and communal affirmation. Incapable of satisfying the savvy postmodern audience's litmus of signaling "the distinction between awareness and ignorance" in his actions and utterances, Michael finds himself reaping the embarrassment and scorn of his glibly sown sentiments (Gans *Originary Thinking* 217).

The problem of glibness is especially glaring in light of the vastness of contemporary popular culture and its discursive preoccupations. When the dominant paradigm emphasizes the moral and ethical pitfalls of pronouns, self-consciousness and cultural fluency are imperative. Being glib relegates Michael to an inferior social sphere where his attempts at signification are fragmentary: he is unaware of how the free-floating "parts" of his signification connect to and suggest various cultural wholes. Not only does this fragmentation frustrate communal comprehension, threatening the originary symmetry of sign exchange, but the byzantine discursive network from which these utterances are drawn have their own disruptive implications. In his worst moments, Michael is rhizome made flesh. As opposed to its niche in postmodernism, where it facilitates endless deferral and wanton supplementarity, now the rhizome becomes fundamentally problematic: the localized implications—the "distance" between the invoked connections and their "fit" in a given context—precipitate a potentially awkward moment. This provides a schema for the generation of awkwardness similar to that of the esthetic in general. When *actual* circumstances are compared to received, normative guidelines and a significant gap appears between the two, anxiety arises proportional to the distance between the model that *should* apply and the actual encounter. Discourse, decorum, tradition, and folkways are often made to "fail" through deliberate exposure to realities antinomic to those which they cultivate.

The best way to illustrate this is through examples. In "Basketball Game," the fifth episode of *The Office*'s first season, Michael comes up with a nickname for one of his African-American warehouse employees: "Darryl Philbin" becomes "Mi'tah Rogers." The logic behind the transformation? "Darryl Philbin, then Regis, then Rege, then Roger, then Mi'tah Rogers." After Darryl walks us through the steps of Michael's creative process, the workers stand silently, uncomfortably eying each other until Michael, grinning glibly at the camera, quips "rapport." The explanation is really no explanation at all—it's clear that common nicknames and celebrities were drawn upon, but the impetus for the transformations is a mystery. Despite their confusion and discomfort, however, the employees don't press their manager for an explanation. We'll connect the dots for them. The first change, from Darryl Philbin to Regis (Philbin) is from a black man to a white one. The rest are phonetic permutations. The tension comes from the last two moves in the sequence: Roger leads (for whatever reason) to "*Mister* Rogers," the white, sweater-wearing-1970s-American-neighbor

archetype. From there Michael renders it with an unmistakably minstrel flair in order to bring it back to "reality," to Darryl, even though he doesn't speak that way.

"Rapport" is his attempt to wink at us, the audience, to say "You know where I'm coming from, right? You get it, right?" He wants to signal his inclusion in the knowing, ironic postmodern club; to flaunt the breadth of his cultural references; to showcase the difficulty of pinning a guy like him down. Instead he simply highlights just how out of touch he is. Though he strives mightily and earnestly, he is never quite able to find his "fit" in the workplace or in the wider world: he wants to be accepted as a friend by his employees, but doesn't understand how it conflicts with his executive obligations; he wants to personalize his relationship to his own superiors at headquarters but does so through wildly inappropriate humor; he has a benevolent impulse to level with the warehouse workers (who are literally below him, in the basement) but every attempt to do so simply reinforces the class divisions which he originally intended to dissolve; et cetera. It is almost impossible for him to speak or act without transgressing or undercutting his credibility. In this sense he blurs the line between tragic and comic. We laugh because he is unaware; we cringe for the same reason. But this is not to say there is no redeeming Michael Scott or his rhizomic soul.

In "Lecture Circuit: Part 1," Michael, whose branch somehow leads Dunder-Mifflin in sales, is asked to give a presentation at a handful of nearby offices. Pam Beesly, the office receptionist, accompanies him as an assistant, chronicler, and damage controller. Her ulterior motive is revealed, though, when it becomes clear that they will be visiting a branch managed by Karen Filippelli. When they both worked at Scranton, Karen and Pam were involved in a love triangle with Jim Halpert, a salesman. Pam won out and Karen left for Utica. When Michael arrives to give his talk, ten months have passed; for approximately half of that, Pam and Jim have been engaged. In the Utica parking lot, Pam expresses to the camera that, yes, she's anxious about the encounter, but if she doesn't attempt some sort of closure now, the whole affair could bother her for the rest of her life. Thus the connections between Pam, Karen, and Michael are numerous, sensitive, and (you realize with a cringe) disastrously vulnerable to Michael/the rhizome.

When Pam and Michael arrive at the Utica branch, Michael (in one of his myriad glibbicisms) suggests to Rolando, the receptionist, that he and Pam go out on a "little friend date"—the (non)connection being that they are both receptionists. Rolando informs Michael and Pam that Karen will come and take them back to the meeting room. Knowing she must be apprehensive, Michael tells Pam to picture Karen naked—that's what he does when he's nervous. As Karen, smiling, comes into view, we see her bulging belly: she's pregnant. Michael gasps—

Michael: Oh my god. Is that Jim's?

Pam: Michael!

> Karen [acidly]: What? Of course not.
>
> Michael: Wooo! Thank god, for everybody, [turning to Pam] right? Wow, you're HUUUUGE! That's incredible! God, sorry, sorry, I'm just—I'm just trying to figure out the last time you and Jim had sex.

It's hard to think of a less professional, less sensitive way for Michael to have handled that encounter. But it is also hard to imagine a quicker way to generate a need for closure. As it happens, closure is put off by Karen who, compelled by management hierarchy (rejecting Michael is a rejection of corporate headquarters), allows Michael to start the presentation despite his massive lack of credibility. As you might imagine, he doesn't get too far. Karen ends Michael's speech after an exercise in learning people's names (inspired by George W. Bush's press conference style) and asks him and Pam into her office. There closure quickly takes place in a way that is distinctly not postmodern: directly. Because Michael's blunders were so apparent, so blithely committed, so fundamentally dissonant in relation to social and professional norms, the moment of closure that occurs between the three demands a proportionally straightforward response. The closure that takes place, whether in "correcting" Michael, or in addressing Pam and Karen's past enmity, takes place linearly, tête à tête, and *draws all marginal figures into the center*. As a result, Pam, Michael, and Karen, when shut up together in an office, act according to the rules of a far more basic, egalitarian sphere. Consequently, beautifully, profoundly, strikingly un-postmodernly, all moves toward closure (or away, toward deferral) must be weighed against the individual dignity of each person implicated.

Finally, the events of "Diversity Day," the second episode of the first season, are also bound up inextricably in issues of respect and common humanity, but have implications for the cultural system—the "text"—upon which Dunder-Mifflin employees predicate their narrative moves. In this episode, a "sensitivity trainer" arrives at Dunder-Mifflin's Scranton branch to address an "incident." The incident was Michael's impassioned performance of an infamous Chris Rock routine about the "two different kinds of black people," which, as you might expect, is wildly inappropriate for the workplace, especially when performed by your white middle-manager.(18) Michael has a tremendously difficult time going along with the corporate seminar because his attempts to control the proceedings are repeatedly rebuffed. After the session is over and Mr. Brown,(19) the sensitivity trainer, has left, Michael strides from his office, rips the contract he and everyone else had to sign (Michael signed his copy "Daffy Duck"), and announces his own campaign for reforming the office.

Malapropism mounts on malapropism, *faux pas* trips over *faux pas* in the execution of whatever Michael thinks he's doing. He sets the tone with a video (made in the office with Dwight), where he somberly intones "Abraham Lincoln once said, that if you're a racist, I will attack you with the north. Those are the principles that I carry with me in the workplace." A round of "introductions" follows in which everyone is encouraged to reveal

their ethnic background. Oscar Martinez, an accountant, after speaking about his Mexican parents immigrating to the United States, is asked by Michael if "there is a term besides Mexican" that he prefers—"something less offensive?" But the gem of it all, the glittering multi-faceted rhizome jewel comes last. Michael concocts an exercise involving index cards with "races" written on them ("race," for Michael, apparently includes "Martin Luther King Jr.," "Jamaican," "Brazil"). He instructs them to pick a card and, without looking at it, tape it to their forehead for everyone to see. "I want you to treat other people like the race that is on their forehead. Everybody has a different race—nobody knows what their race is. So, I want you to really go for it! 'Cause this is real. You know, this isn't just an exercise, this is real life. And *I,* have a dream*, that you will really let the sparks fly*! *Git 'er done!*" He moves through the crowd, coaxing his uncomfortable employees to "stir the pot—stir the melting pot!" When Pam Beesly ("Jewish") and Stanley Hudson ("Black") refuse to let fly with the outrageous stereotypes that Michael's hoping for, he whines "Come on, Olympics of suffering right here! Slavery versus the Holocaust!" Eventually Kelly Kapoor walks into the meeting room. Michael lights up—now he can show everyone how to git 'er done, as Larry the Cable Guy says. Grinning, he launches into his best/most insulting impression of an Indian convenience store owner. Kelly slaps him and walks out of the room, leaving everyone—even Michael—in silence.

All this by virtue of the rhizome. Michael thinks "race" and the office runs wild with hegemonic traces: slurs, stereotypes, caricatures; white guilt, sexism and racism masquerading as humor; et cetera. Admittedly the rhizome can be devastatingly repugnant—but only as repugnant, of course, as its available links. And that is exactly the rhizome's utility for post-postmodernism: chronotopically constructing boundaries, policing supplements and traces, attempting to balance the perils of value systems by binding them to common human dignity and communal integrity.

When Kelly slaps Michael, the virtuality ends and the private discomfort of the employees becomes a publicly manifested representation of attitudes toward the center. At the same time she yanks Michael into the present mode where the ramifications of his glibness are felt instantly. Discourse and practice become linked locally and are not dispersible into any larger contexts. As with *Borat*, the resentment built up by opacity and the rhizome was so great that violence loomed—and just as with *Borat*, we saw an extreme hesitance to voice disagreement or opposition directly. Here, though, something had to give and Michael was slapped. Sometimes the particular is the universal.

closure

Earnestness and awkwardness are not *new*, of course, but in the context of this sociocultural moment they are key contingencies of the post-postmodernism as described by performatism and generative anthropology. Opacity, we should now see, is the continuum along which the awkward and the earnest occur. Earnestness is the initial, mild

manifestation. As it builds in intensity and social dislocation, it may turn into the awkward. Situating it within the larger context of generative anthropology yields the most extreme manifestation of opacity: violence. This force, more primal than even the originary scene, supersedes the continuum and explodes it. It is for this reason that two of the most uncomfortable episodes of *the Office* on record involved confrontations that either escalated beyond the point of language to make a difference (Andy Bernard punching a hole in the wall in "the Return"[(20)]) or dangerously approached that point (Stanley Hudson's refusal to respect Michael in "Did I Stutter?"[(21)] nearly prompts a reversion to the animal kingdom's method of settling hierarchical disputes). But we have not yet discussed the prime mover of the post-postmodern universe itself, the fundamental *source* of opacity: *belief*.

"Use of a sign is not in the first place a paradigmatic choice among signs, but a choice to signify—that is, a choice to create significance out of nonsignificance, a creation that can, in principle, become the subject of a narration" (Gans, *Originary Thinking* 105). The movement from the postmodern mode of pure textuality to the post-millennial one of (re)narrativization begins simply with the realization that significance points two ways: forward, to a referent, and backward, to a subject. Performatism frames this interpersonally: a post-postmodern "subject expresses itself in holistic performances in which it believes; other, competing subjects question these acts of belief" (Eshelman 3). We began this essay with *Borat* because Sacha Baron Cohen exemplifies this dynamic without adding (too much) content of his own. The approach—impinging on the dignity and prejudices, the vices and virtues of those around him—is as radically simple in practice as it is complex in effect. As much as anything else that I am aware of, as much as any mediated experience *can*, he engages the excruciatingly ambiguous, achingly fraught valences of the awkward.

Understandably, this raises concerns. When pressed about the moral and ethical implications of making a movie like *Borat*, Larry Charles defended the project by saying "I feel like we're doing the work of God":

Well, we're not—first of all, we never force anyone to do anything. Okay? We are tapping into people's ego, people's vanity, people's hubris. No one has ever—has their arm twisted or is manipulated, really, in any way to say the things that they say. We hope that they will say provocative funny things as a result of these conversations, but I don't feel that we are really deceiving.We are presenting an alternate reality and we are playing in that alternate reality within the rules of that alternate reality. We never say oh, it's not Brüno. It's really Sacha Baron Cohen. It's not Borat it's really—we are playing that reality until we get in our van and drive away. So as far as they're concerned, it is totally real. So I don't feel that it is a deception, in a way, because then you have to define what reality is in the first place and that's tough enough.

Charles can't possibly mean "God's work" in the sense of proselytizing for any specific faith. What he seems to be stressing is the idea of freedom. In Christian theology, humanity

exercises free will against the backdrop of divine centrality that grants it; framed anthropologically, you are free to threaten or abuse the social order in which you are situated. By "God's will" Charles is suggesting that a compromising situation is also one that offers grace, whether secular or celestial: when you find yourself caught in a room with Borat, do you acquit yourself with dignity, with poise and humanity, or do you act out of vanity and hubris?

The Office's response to these concerns is Jim Halpert. If Dwight alienates others by virtue of his own individual integrity and Michael drives them away out of his incoherence, Jim Halpert's role in the show is in working toward minimization of resentment, toward harmony, toward finding his own "fit" with others and in the wider world. Michael, then, embodies the (performatist) force of "evil" while Jim is the force of "love." This is figuratively and literally the case, as Jim and Pam Beesly are the only two in the workplace to achieve the ultimate, transcendent "fit" of love. The show began with Pam engaged to a warehouse worker named Roy, but there was a constant, nagging tension caused by her deeper attraction to Jim. Navigating this situation was a through line that lasted for several seasons. By the sixth season, Pam and Jim—having weathered minor romances, a move to another town and another branch of Dunder-Mifflin, and the myriad disputes and obstacles that accompany all lovers—are married.

Jim's knack for balance also becomes clear in occasions where Jim must take over the executive role normally occupied by Michael. This forces him to leave the postmodern realm of "undecidability" for that of centrality, where he becomes the locus for narrative return and central affirmation. Whereas Michael is obsessed with cultural fluency—spreading himself across the rhizomic expanse, so to speak, until any frame of reference virtually disappears—Jim balances an aloof knowingness with the contingencies of practical application. One of his defining traits is looking at the camera, eyebrows raised in solicitation of the audience's incredulity to consider alongside his own. Here is a bit of meta-consciousness on *The Office*'s part; here is an explicit announcement of the *agon* of the center. Jim's primary concern in these moments is minimizing resentment. The last thing he would want to do would be to act according to a private (or in the case of Michael, incommunicable) dogma, for fear that he would simply heighten the tension of asymmetry. Equally undesirable would be for him to make a narrative claim on the center that would fail to be legitimized by the periphery. Thus he requires, at the very least, the awareness of others. If he is forced to step into the center, the asymmetry of his own action—that awkwardness of being earnest—will ideally be compensated by consensus.

Implied in all of Jim's actions is a sort of conviction, a sort of belief. But that implication will never see outright articulation, as the "whole" only develops iteratively through separate responses to separate contingencies. Like this era, Jim is a transitional figure, continuously exploring the space between Dwight's solipsistic zeal and Michael Scott's near transparency. Jim charts the way for how the post-millennial will distinguish itself from the

postmodern, specifically in how it addresses the latter's textual anxiety**.** The "post-postmodern condition," as it were, should be thought of as having its own fundamental tension: in the face of postmodernism's terror of metanarratives and discursive contamination, the post-postmodern makes a leap of narrativity hoping for the grace of the universal.

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Notes

1. Many thanks to the *Anthropoetics* editorial board for guidance and criticism in the revision process. (back)

2. "Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism." *Anthropoetics* 6.2. Fall 2000 / Winter 2001. (back)

3. All these examples of the awkward were taken from popular media. Listed in order of their citation: *Tim and Eric's Awesome Show Great Job!*, *Flight of the Conchords*, *the Office*, *Borat*, *Juno*, comedian Zach Galifianakis' *Live at the Purple Onion,* and *Extras*. The last was an experience of mine. (back)

4. Some of the encounters are scripted (see the scene in which Borat kidnaps Pamela Anderson), but knowing participants are kept to a minimum. (back)

5. In an NPR interview for another Sacha Baron Cohen/Larry Charles film, *Brüno*, the director reveals just how simple it is to throw up a screen of legitimacy for Cohen's personas. All Charles need say is something like: "He's a style reporter from a different country, and you know how people from different countries are, we know how those Europeans are and so be patient with him. He's wants to learn about American culture." (back)

6. When the dinner society calls the police to deal with Borat, they are implicitly nodding at this fear, at this need to sublimate their violent impulse. Instead of someone personally directing violence at Borat, a higher, impersonal authority is invoked that is specifically sanctioned to use violence for the sake of the social order. (back)

7. Those familiar with Eric Gans' "Chronicles of Love and Resentment" will no doubt recognize that this portion of my treatment of *Borat* is a classic example of victimary politics. The discussion below regarding *the Office* will touch again on the issue of race. While the links are compelling, they will not be pursued for the sake of brevity. (back)

8. Search YouTube.com for "the star wars kid," "the numa numa kid," and "Tay Zonday's chocolate rain" to see examples of earnestness embodied. Note the nearly 100,000,000 combined views. Chalk them up to how postmodernists, in *the* postmodern medium, fetishize the earnestness. Witness all the linked remixes to see how a postmodern

constituency responds to earnestness by mediating it through familiar texts, thereby transforming it into a "semantically differentiated surface that can be absorbed and dispersed" into the infinitely expanse that is the internet (Eshelman 2). (back)

9. "Blank" is necessarily suspended. Web browsers are as politicized as name brand clothing; if you use Internet Explorer, for instance, your browsing experience immediately becomes suspect, both for its connection to Microsoft as well as its infamously poor performance. (back)

10. There is a whole tradition of websites which are characterized by having *no* links to other web pages or content. Again, we find that Eshelman's opacity is shared aesthetic territory between popular culture and the internet. The effect of these websites is derived from this process: As you progress through a series of links (which you expect to give way to ever more links), you encounter one that leads to a singular bit of media, halting any subsequent movement by presenting itself as a self-contained whole. There is a growing canon of such websites. It ranges from *exceedingly depraved and obscene* exhibitions of sexuality ("two girls one cup"), to random but "awesome" mashups of obscure cultural bits ("Killer Japanese Seizure Robots"), to the entrancingly beautiful aesthetic of the unselfconscious (see footnote 8). (back)

11. Also see Digg.com, Stumbleupon.com, and Delicious.com. (back)

12. First airing in 1999 but failing to achieve success until 2004. (back)

13. As of November 1, 2008: "Among males 18 to 34, often cited as the most desirable demographic in advertising, *Family Guy* is the highest-rated scripted program in all of television. . . . It is the second-highest-rated show among males 18 to 49. It is among the most-downloaded shows on iTunes and the most-watched programs on Hulu, and it was the eighth most-pirated show of 2007 on BitTorrent sites." <http://www.foxbusiness.com> (back)

14. Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators of *South Park* (another hugely popular cartoon with the 18-34 crowd), dedicated two episodes of their show to lambasting *Family Guy*. Here is their critique, featured in "Cartoon Wars II" as described by Wikipedia: "Cartman [a character in *South Park*] is introduced to the Family Guy writing staff, who turn out to be a group of manatees. The aquatic mammals, who live in a large tank, pick up 'idea balls' from a large pile of them, each of which has a different noun, a verb or a pop-culture reference written on it, and deliver them, five at a time, to a machine that then forms a Family Guy cutaway gag based on those ideas. For example, 'Laundry' + 'Date' + 'Winning' + 'Mexico' + 'Gary Coleman' becomes a clip of Lois asking Peter to do the laundry, after which Peter recalls winning a date in Mexico with Gary Coleman." (back)

15. It may be surprising to find that *Family Guy* managed to stumble (quite literally) on

opacity, the fundamental post-postmodern foil. By now a recurring gag, the classic instance is a montage of Peter Griffin sprinting home after finding a silver ticket (a la *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*). He speeds through the town of Quahog, passing from one familiar frame to another, spirited along by a stirring, upbeat score, face lit up by childlike glee, eyes set with an equally childish urgency—when suddenly he trips and crumples to the ground. Doubled up in pain, he clutches his knee, groans, sucks air through his teeth—groans, clutches his knee, sucks air through his teeth—groans, clutches his knee, sucks air through his teeth—fifteen seconds of this, then twenty, and at thirty the scene ends abruptly, and only by virtue of the supreme exterior intercession of the commercial break. Here, instead of the usual breakneck, desultory abandon of the show where the present slips ever more rapidly into a riptide of references, a single moment absolutely devoid of excess semantic content threatens to dilate indefinitely. [(back)](#)

16. The foremost example of this are the show's "talking head" moments, which usually consist of a single character alone in a room commenting on a scene after the fact, or responding to a prompt from the (unseen, unheard) production crew. [(back)](#)

17. The "character" of Creed is only semi-fictional. The actor who plays him *is* Creed Bratton, who was a member of "the Grass Roots," a rock band from the 1960s. [(back)](#)

18. Michael airing his grievances in a talking head moment: "How come Chris Rock can do a routine, and everybody finds it hilarious and groundbreaking, and then *I* go and do the exact same routine—same comedic timing—and people file a complaint to corporate? Is it because I'm white and Chris is black?" [(back)](#)

19. At one point Michael asks Mr. Brown, an African-American, if that's his real name. [(back)](#)

20. Season three, episode thirteen. [(back)](#)

21. Season four, episode four. [(back)](#)