Queer Seriousness

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“Can you please be serious?”
— Chris to Greg, in Falling in Love… with Chris and Greg

“Truly, you would be quite horrified if your request were answered, and the world would all of a sudden become, in all seriousness, comprehensible.”
— Friedrich Schlegel, “Über die Unverstandlichkeit”

In a recent piece on irony and digital culture, Alexandra Juhasz writes that in the era of YouTube, “[i]t has become impossible… to see the difference between sincerity and satire. We can’t.”1 Though she doesn’t give this example, Juhasz might have had in mind, say, Kanye West’s video for Bound 2 (2013), in which his wife Kim Kardashian wretches naked on a motorcycle while he intones: “One good girl is worth a thousand bitches.”2 When James Franco and Seth Rogan remade the video shot-for-shot, substituting for its dubious celebration of heterosexual male virility their own parodic performance of homosexuality, Kardashian responded by tweet: “You nailed it!!! Sooo funny!” and: “Kanye says what’s up! He loves u guys! He laughed so hard at this.”3 Bound 2 anticipates and welcomes its own parody, because it is already a self-parody — or is it?4 It is this confusion that Juhasz takes to be endemic to a contemporary culture in which the Internet has supplanted the cinema as predominating medium. Contemporaneous with this shift (whether or not as a result of it), we have come, writes Juhasz, to “inhabit a new structure of viewing that is neither sharp nor critical; rather, we now see muddled and confused, albeit funny.”5 If grammar has here been sacrificed to a critical passion whose absence from culture it bemoans, it is in order to make the point all the more clearly: the cultural hypertrophy of humor and irony comes at the expense of critique, of clear investments, of seriousness.

This lament is not new. In 1964, in “Notes on ‘Camp’,” Susan Sontag famously proclaimed that “[t]he two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony.”6 (It is hard to decide whether the proclamation is itself an example of the former or of the latter.) But in 1996, in a retrospective Afterword to Against Interpretation, Sontag revised her earlier view. What she had failed to grasp in the 1960s, she now concluded, was that at the very moment of her analysis, “seriousness… was in the early stages of losing credibility in the culture at large.” The aesthetic sensibilities she championed — the camp and the transgressive — have since prevailed, but at the expense of the values that lay behind her endorsement, which is to say only in the form of “frivolous, merely consumerist transgressions.”7 “Now,” she adds wistfully, “the very idea of the serious (and of the honorable) seems quaint, ‘unrealistic,’ to most people.”8 The reader to whom Sontag addresses this lament is left to presume that it is the victory of “homosexual aestheticism and irony” over “Jewish moral seriousness” — the dwindling of the latter no doubt bound up in the elevation of the former to the status of a general cultural principle — that has ushered in what she describes, quite seriously, as our current “age of nihilism.”9

I will say more about such doomsday pronouncements, which recur in many accounts of postmodern culture. Less grandiosely, my present interest, which bears on the question of seriousness, is in the matter of perspective, namely a text’s perspective on its subject, often described
through a spatial metaphorics of which “perspective” is already an instance. Sontag, for example, refers to the “special distance from the subject” that she associates with irony and stylization, while Juhasz periodizes the collapse of this distance: “Once, there was a modernist gap between the thing and its perverse double, an in-between space of clarity in which to create a humorous or serious distance or dissonance that allowed the artist and viewer the chance to speak and see critically…”10 The question of where a text stands, so to speak, in relation to itself animates these accounts of what distinguishes our contemporary cultural moment (call it postmodern) from what came before.

It is worth underscoring that so-called “critical distance” is at once a distance of the text from itself, an internal feature of a text that produces the narrative voice (or what I will call, following Tom Gunning, the “filmic narrator”) as a positionality distinct from what it narrates. Unfaithfully adapting Benveniste’s terms, I will also describe this as the distance between the énonciation (by which I mean, perspective created in the “uttering” of the text) and énoncé (what is uttered, the text itself). When this distance loses its ground, the result is the confusion between sincerity and satire that so troubles Juhasz.11 In the first place, I will suggest that irony names the propensity to reversal inherent to signification (a currently unfashionable critical term which describes, however, the constitutive feature of texts) that corrodes every attempt at seriousness. An “absolute infinite negativity,” as Kierkegaard put it in his doctoral dissertation devoted to the topic, irony is at once the text’s distance from itself and what renders that effect of textual distance precarious.12 But more specifically, I am concerned here with a contemporary queer aesthetics in which the negativity of irony is elevated to an overarching formal principle—even if not simply in the familiar mode of camp (which Sontag described as a mode “the whole point of [which] is to dethrone the serious”).13

I will restrict my remarks to the analysis of a single work, one that Juhasz, incidentally, takes to be symptomatic of the dwindling of seriousness in YouTube culture. Falling in Love… with Chris and Greg is a web series created by Chris Vargas and Greg Youmans between 2008 and 2013 and distributed on YouTube, and through a dedicated website.14 Though Juhasz includes Chris and Greg among her examples of “fake documentaries,” the premise of the series is that the eponymous pair, a real couple, play themselves: Vargas is a well-known queer video artist (whose oeuvre includes Chris and Greg), and Youmans is a film scholar. The series follows the efforts of transgendered, politically “radical” Chris, and cisgendered, politically “liberal” Greg to find a relational form that can accommodate the love into which, in spite of their differences, they find themselves falling. As well as a “fake documentary,” Chris and Greg is thus also a work of digital self-portraiture that “quotes” from the contemporary genres of the video blog and reality television while also participating in them. (This also already suggests the problem of perspective that the series raises.) Finally, Chris and Greg, while exhibiting neither the urbane aestheticism of Oscar Wilde (who furnishes the epigraphs for Sontag’s essay on camp), nor the flat affect of Andy Warhol, nor the ribald outrageousness of John Waters, nevertheless draws from all three, and is thus situated unmistakably in a tradition of Anglo-American queer aesthetics. As a self-portrait of sorts of a “real life” couple, not quite camp, but also not not-camp, the series has as much in common with Kanye’s Bound 2, a work in which self-portraiture and self-parody are similarly intertwined. Somewhere between a queer art tradition and Bound 2, Chris and Greg offers a useful site for addressing the question of seriousness in specific relation to current developments in queer aesthetics.
Corrosive queer irony

“Words have a way of saying things which are not at all what you want them to say.” These words, cited by Lee Edelman in *No Future*, were written by Paul de Man, looking backward to German Romanticism, paraphrasing Schlegel, who was for his part quoting Goethe: “die Worte verstehen sich selbst oft besser, als diejenigen, von denen sie gebraucht werden.” In Goethe’s words, literally: words often understand themselves better than those whom they are used by (the passive formulation is his). There is a certain irony at work in Goethe’s *bon mot*, because it is obvious that words, lacking consciousness, thus lack, unlike those whom they are used by, the faculty of understanding that would authorize the comparison; it is only through an illegitimate or absurd anthropomorphism that words could be said to be better than humans at an activity—*sich verstehen*—that is uniquely human. But Goethe is also serious, and de Man’s essay poses a serious challenge to the humanist bias that would prevent our taking him at his word. Irony, for de Man, is not what it is typically taken to be by, for example, Fredric Jameson, who will describe it as “the very locus of the notion of self-consciousness and the reflexive.” On the contrary, words are a “text machine.” In language, the capacity for which may be distinctively human, we are already post-human. Though it appears—to Fichte, for example—to be the achievement of a “self standing above its experiences,” irony, writes de Man, names rather the fact that any utterance or theory “will always be interrupted, always be disrupted, always be undone by the ironic dimension it will necessarily contain,” in other words by the fact that words have a way of saying things and you have no idea at all what they are really saying,
this "you" that reflexively soars above its experiences comes crashing down at every moment, whether you know it or not—where “knowing it” implies the very certainty that irony corrodes.\footnote{18}

For example, “you are writing a fine compliment for somebody and without your knowledge, just because words have a way of doing things, it’s sheer insult and obscenity that you are really saying.”\footnote{19} You mean to give a compliment but you really utter an insult, just like when, in an episode of Falling in Love… with Chris And Greg, Greg tells Chris: “Chris, your work is really important.” This “really,” whose ostensible function is to strengthen the predicate, rather has the effect of undermining it (to protest is always to risk protesting too much…). Of course, de Man’s point is that irony makes it impossible to finally settle the question of what is really being said, so his reference to what “you are really saying” is, so to speak, just a manner of speaking. The restlessness of that really, its propensity to reversal, is what leads Kierkegaard to equate irony with infinite negativity.\footnote{20}

Less abstractly, the de-stabilizations of the really have become a relationship problem for Chris and Greg. Is Chris’s work really important? Does Greg really think so? Is his saying so an attempt to produce, through the force of illocution, a transvaluation of the work he had earlier dismissed as “little YouTube videos documenting your transition”? (Double irony: the work we are watching is Chris’s work.) The discourse of the Supportive Lover is corroded by the really it all too obtrusively marshals. This is a discourse, and a corrosion, that runs in both directions: “You know that I think your scholarship is really important,” Chris had earlier assured Greg, in a statement at once redundant (no need to tell Greg what he already knows) and performative. (The combination of redundancy and performativity is a recurrent one in Chris's discourse, for example when he tells Greg, with reference to a physical flaw he has just pointed out, “You know I like it…”)

“I love you” is also a performatve, as Roland Barthes observed in a book which exposes the lover’s discourse as itself an elaborate text machine.\footnote{21} Certainly, the fact that love exists within language and cannot free itself of its discursive constitution means it is fraught with the kind of “communication problems” couples therapists are paid to hear about. In some sense, Falling in Love… with Chris and Greg is about these problems, about navigating the groundless thing called love, an affective disposition towards the other or an ethical commitment, or a relation at once utterly conventional and generic and yet which feels unique and sui generis and even—in the case of a “trans/cis [gay] couple”—avant-garde, with few culturally available precedents.\footnote{22} Describing the process of creating the series, Vargas says: “Issues would come up in our actual relationship and… we made videos about those issues.”\footnote{23} Elsewhere, he adds: “It’s nice to be able to have an outlet outside a couple’s therapy venue that diffuses and neutralizes their impact.”\footnote{24}

So the series is about real “relationship issues.” At the same time, therapy culture is the object of an especially pronounced satire in Chris and Greg, as in the episode titled “Food!,” when Chris discusses his relationship problems with a therapist who carries Playa dust from Burning Man in a vial around his neck, and turns out to have no qualifications at all. In another scene, Chris seeks counsel from his “radical” friend Durt, who sits in front of a portrait of herself and whose response begins with the narcissistic double-redundancy: “I really value our friendship, but for my own personal self-care…” (Chris replies: “Thanks for being forthright with me, Durt. Wow, I have always admired your ability to directly communicate.”) If the series is “about” the relationship issues produced by the corrosive irony of language, it also ironizes the therapeutic framework through which “issues” appear as such. Its creators seem to have learned the Barthesian lesson that personal confessions of the most intimate experience can’t help but traffic in the discursive clichés of which they are formed, but also the Nietzschean and Freudian lesson that the most noble-seeming rhetoric has its hidden
roots in cruelty. Indeed, a certain Nietzschean misanthropy runs throughout the series, in which every act of apparent kindness is at risk of reverting into “error, madness, or simple-minded stupidity.”

For its part, the titular love, at once affect and ideal, condenses these aspects of groundlessness, of performativity, and of ironic reversibility, yet it remains the central term around which the narrative is organized, the sine qua non of the series, not just as narrative object, but also as the real condition of the series’ production.

Really real
Juhasz ends her essay on irony with the call that queer art should begin to get “real. Really real.” And in a last redundant clause, she adds: “I mean it,” as if her not saying so would throw that fact into doubt. (She has had enough; she wants words to mean what they mean. Of course, “meaning,” like “meaning it,” is precisely what irony undermines, which no affirmation can overcome…) But rather than in the relentlessness of its “postmodern” de-realizations, the difficulty of “reading” Chris and Greg lies, on the contrary, in the insistence of the real, extra-textual referent that complicates what might be more easily intelligible as (mere) satire. The alloying of the real and the satirical interrupts each mode with the other, in the manner of a parabasis—in de Man’s words, “the interruption of a discourse by a shift in the rhetorical register.” Here that shift does not take place punctually (as when, in the example de Man gives, an actor drops out of her role to address the audience directly) but is perpetually at work, as the co-presence of multiple registers (sincerity/satire; reality/fiction; critique/narration) which collide without annulling each other.

It is the ambiguity produced by this mutual confusion of modes (rather than the evacuation of meaning or of the stable ground of what Juhasz calls the “really real”) that gives the series its charge. In Episode One, “O Canada!,” Chris rehearses a well-known “queer radical” argument against monogamy. “I think [sleeping with someone else] would be really good for you — for us,” he tells Greg, “in rejecting a commodified idea of sex and love.” Chris, it turns out, has already arranged for Greg to go on a date with “a Canadian” (the positing of “Canadian” as an identity category runs throughout the episode as an allegory and a joke). Here the dialogue combines absurd elements, such as the singling out of “Canadians,” with arguments about the ethics of monogamy and its alternatives that are familiar from real debates. The date goes disastrously, partly because of Greg’s assumptions about Canadians (“so do you like to go camping?”). The next morning over tea, Chris asks Greg to report on the date, and after first insisting that it led to a revelation about the virtues of promiscuity (“I can’t wait to have sex with more people so that I can love you even more, in a non-capitalistic way”), Greg ends by confessing his feelings of failure. Chris comforts him as he breaks down in tears: “I can’t do this! I’m just not good at it!” The scene—and the episode—ends with the following exchange:

G: You don’t think I’m a bad feminist or anything do you, just because I only want to be with you?
C: Of course not. You’re the best bi-gayboy feminist I know, and you don’t have to do anything to prove that to me. Just you waking up next to me in the morning makes you a good feminist.
G: And you still wanna…. fuck me, right?
C: Of course. I like nothing more than to pleasure you in bed.

As Chris hugs Greg from behind, staring into the middle distance, the shot continues in silence for a full twenty seconds before finally fading to black. It is at once a tender image—Chris gently comforting his real-life lover while telling him how much he enjoys their sex together—and
unnerving, because this image of tenderness is rendered multiply ambiguous. The affectlessness of Vargas’s delivery drains his words of the warmth that would make them feel authentic. The assurance he offers seems rote, as formulaic as the “I love you too” that each “I love you” demands.

Whether Chris really likes “nothing more” than to pleasure Greg in bed is something of which his saying so leaves us less, not more, certain, an uncertainty compounded by the emptiness of the shot that continues in the wake of this assurance. Equally unclear is the status of the comment that “just waking up next to” Chris every morning makes Greg “a good feminist.” Perhaps Chris (the character) really thinks so; perhaps he means that the love between cisgendered and transgendered men supports at the affective level a “feminist” decoupling of gender from sex, or that it attests to a “feminist” refusal, at the level of Greg’s own desire, of a biologically essentialist or phallocentric homosexuality. Perhaps the text shares this view, and wants us to share it. But such a reading of the exchange is complicated by what has preceded it. Moments earlier in the video, on the ill-fated date, Greg described his erotic relationship to Chris’s body in a mode that seemed more obviously (though still not unequivocally) parodic, partly because of Greg’s more histrionic (thus, caricatural) acting style: “At first it was hard; having sex with him was just so different. I realize now that in the past I had been interacting with other men as just sort of like extensions of myself. Sex with them had really just been sort of a continuation of masturbation… But now here was like real difference. It
world picture 9 (summer 2014)

was like the origin of the world had snuck in through the back door, crawled into bed with me, and was crouching there between his legs, flapping at me.”

Greg’s Canadian would-be paramour seems nonplussed by this account, as well might the spectator be. The monologue descends into absurdism, as Greg imagines Chris’s vagina judging him: “Why are you so irresponsible? Why don’t you call your mother more?” But it begins more descriptively, with the statement that having sex with a man in possession of a vagina was a departure from Greg’s previous sexual experiences, which (he tells us) had all been with cisgendered men. As he continues, Greg makes other plausible, though increasingly problematic, assertions, such as the claim that sexual difference, embodied in anatomical organs, incarnates _real difference_ that is in turn the basis of true relationality, with the concomitant characterization of homosexual relations between anatomically like men as a form of auto-relation or narcissism. Such reasoning is familiar from homophobic arguments in France, for example, against _homoparentalité_. At the same time, for a cisgendered gay man describing his first sexual experience with a transgendered partner, the narrative of “difference” is not only satirical. Here, as throughout the series, what complicates the exchange further is the extra-textual referent: since Greg and Chris are really a couple, we assume the sexual encounter Greg describes is not merely fictional, which means this incident is not just allegorical. In any case, when Chris says their relationship makes Greg a “feminist,” it is hard not to recall the paean to the vagina Greg has delivered moments earlier, with the effect that the statement
now seems to index (if not to directly represent) both the real negotiations of their extra-textual relationship and a set of assumptions we can only assume the series itself does not share with its characters.

The “series itself,” or the filmic narrator
“The series itself,” then, is not any of the characters that appear within it as figures of (potential) allegory, but rather the allegorizing logic that calls those characters into being, the imaginary figure of what Tom Gunning, drawing on Genette and Ricoeur, calls the “filmic narrator.” It will be helpful to briefly revisit Gunning’s account. As do literary texts, film and media texts involve a certain arrangement of formal elements; for audiovisual texts these comprise three categories, in Gunning’s schema: the profilmic, the enframed image, and editing. Even in classical narrative productions which aim at narrative transparency—an effect of events simply unfolding in front of the camera—the spectator (herself an abstraction) perceives the text to be emanating from a coherent source, the filmic narrator. This would not be an actual person (i.e. the author or director) but rather the textually-encoded effect of “intentionality” which is a condition of any text’s meaningfulness, and is what prevents it from appearing to be a random or contingent collection of elements. “We receive a text,” writes Gunning, “as though it were saying something to us… We experience it as an intentional object, designed to have certain effects on us.”

The irony (by which I mean: the groundlessness and play of misfiring) that corrodes the characters’ speech in Falling in Love… with Chris and Greg, to comic effect, also corrodes the énonciation of the filmic narrator. (I will use Gunning’s term without modification because the formal features indicated by “filmic” here function in the same way with video.) In some special cases, this filmic narrator adopts the style of one of its characters: this is the famous free indirect discourse, a term Pasolini introduced into film theory. Where direct quotation in cinema, writes Pasolini, takes the form of the direct point-of-view shot, free indirect discourse is a general absorption of the character’s worldview into the narrative sensibility. His famous example is Antonioni’s Red Desert, in which the director “looks at the world by immersing himself in his neurotic protagonist,” such that the “worldview of a neurotic” and Antonioni’s own delirious formalism are made to coincide. But while they coincide to aesthetic effect, we would never attribute Giuliana’s confusion to the filmic narrator, who, unlike Giuliana, knows exactly what he is doing, which is, as it happens, calmly unfolding a cinematic masterpiece, in virtuosic control of every one of its elements.

Pasolini borrows the term free indirect discourse from literary criticism, of course, which also furnishes the model for Gunning’s “filmic narrator.” In a discussion of Jane Austen, who perfected this technique for the 19th century novel, D.A. Miller describes how what he calls the masterful “No One” of the narration distinguishes itself from the confused, compromised characters whose worldview that narration sometimes stylistically absorbs. This distinction is never called into question by—indeed is most perfectly produced through—Austen’s deployment of a free indirect style in which “the narration’s way of saying is constantly both mimicking, and distancing itself from, the character’s way of seeing.”

This distancing-within-mimicking—Miller calls it irony—is key, because it is what produces the narration’s “epistemological advantage over character,” and thus allows the representations of flawed or vain speech to register as such:

When free indirect style mimics Emma’s thoughts and feelings, it simultaneously inflects them into keener observations of its own; for our benefit, if never for hers, it identifies,
ridicules, corrects all the secret vanities and self-deceptions of which Emma, pleased as Punch, remains comically unconscious.\textsuperscript{36}

That brilliant narrative No One, indulging in an identification with character only in order to put character “under its correction,” uses the distance of irony to construct a perspective that is itself unimpeachable.\textsuperscript{37}

Unimpeachable, beyond reproach, but only because No One itself furnishes the standard of judgment, in the form of a highly codified set of normative values which turn around conjugality as both narrative end and as fundamental social principle. No One’s ironic distance from its erring and self-deluding characters marks the stability of those values, of which no one, including No One, is ever in doubt, and the ultimate adherence to which No One ruthlessly enforces through the machinations of narrative karma.

Falling in love in \textit{Emma} takes place according to this conjugal imperative whose universality is reflected in the universality of No One. But in \textit{Falling in Love... with Chris and Greg}, the narration fails to clearly distinguish itself from its characters, who thus risk not being put “under its correction.” Whereas in \textit{Emma}, the separation of narration from character is produced through No One’s flawless control of formal elements (what Miller calls “Absolute Style”), in \textit{Chris and Greg}, the \textit{énonciation} of the filmic narrator is halting and uneven, technically graceless, and rarely possessed of the clarity that would furnish an interpretive framework for its \textit{énoncé}. In narrative cinema, such a framework is typically constructed through formal cues including music, editing and performance styles which clearly demarcate the comedic from the tragic, and techniques of framing and lighting which “express” visually the inner world of characters, or, in the case of “committed” cinema, expose the socioeconomic conditions that call for redress.

I have mentioned certain moments in \textit{Falling in Love... with Chris and Greg} at which the filmic narrator’s relation to its material does settle into recognizable registers of satire. One such moment occurs in Episode Two (“Road Trip TV Special!”) when Chris and Greg, passing through Monument Valley, re-enact a scene from John Ford’s \textit{The Searchers}.\textsuperscript{38} Introduced via a fade from black, the sequence uses highly saturated color (a digital approximation of Technicolor), music from the original film, exaggerated performance styles, and a slow motion effect when Greg, as Debbie, faints into the arms of Chris, as Martin. These stylizations mark the sequence as camp, in Sontag’s sense: a sensibility that takes pleasure in (and thereby transvalues) the “bad”, and that turns style into stylization; what she calls the “theatricalization of experience.”\textsuperscript{39} They produce the affectionate distance — the “affection contradicted by contempt, obsession contradicted by irony”—by means of which a work (we can say: the filmic narrator) attains “a special distance from [its] subject,” which is to say: an internal distance from itself.\textsuperscript{40}
Parody, satire and camp, whatever distinctions we wish to draw between these terms, all establish a coherent position of narrative énonciation that, in its marked ironic distance from the énoncé, constructs a filmic narrator on the model of the “self standing above its own experiences.” But clearly marked parody, which appears in the Searchers sequence, is an exceptional mode in Chris and Greg. The series fails to manifest consistently the obsessive interest in style Sontag associates with camp and stylization just as it fails to evince the sophisticated subtlety of good craft which follows what Miller elsewhere calls “[c]raft’s golden rule: to keep quiet about itself.” The filmic narrator neither disappears into the seamlessness of a craft whose proficiency, were we to notice it, we could only admire, nor does it, outside of isolated sequences like the Searchers parody, indulge in the spectacle of form as form, as something distinct from content, “placing the accent less on what [it is] saying than on the manner of saying it.” We are left in the presence of an uncertain “intentionality,” to return to Gunning’s term, in the hands of a filmic narrator who neither skillfully embodies good craft nor operates in recognizable, and thus reassuring, modes of parody, camp, or satire—all modes which put the textual object, in different ways, “under [their] correction.”

Abjuring the seamlessness and invisibility of what John David Rhodes calls the “‘classical’ style” of self-“effacement,” here the filmic narrator speaks haltingly in the language of video, and we are not sure if this inarticulacy is that of a traveller failing to perfectly pronounce sentences in a foreign tongue, or of a poet adopting a vernacular (William Carlos Williams: “Man/gimme the key// and
lemme loose/ I make ‘em crazy’). If the series repeatedly thematizes the gap between **énonciation** and **énoncé** in the speech of its odd couple protagonist, this gap is also palpable (one could say, “made palpable,” but the agency of that “making” is precisely what the gap throws into question) in the **énonciation** of the filmic narrator, which is to say, the series’ imperfect deployment of its formal and narrative means.

**Queer de-skilling**

*Falling in Love… with Chris and Greg* is not alone among works of contemporary video and online art in dispensing with established (cinematic and televisual) practices of “good craft.” Vargas, in his other collaborations and independent projects, typically works with a “DIY,” no-budget aesthetic that draws on vernacular YouTube uses of video and also references a history of queer film and video production that refuses technical “polish.” Indeed, to this extent Vargas participates in a longer tradition of queer film and video in which the obtrusiveness of the recording apparatus calls attention to the material limitations that no superior application of technique, or deployment of technical resources, has managed (or attempted) to overcome. Vargas’ venerable precursors in this anti-aesthetic, or “de-skilled,” vein include, among US artists, Barbara Rubin, Jack Smith, Warhol, and Mike and George Kuchar. The interest of these artists’ work does not lie in their successful application of traditional principles of good craft, which they tend rather wantonly to flout.

Most famously among the works in that tradition, Warhol’s films are durational experiments in which a prurient eroticism made coextensive with cinematic looking fuses with the boredom produced by the near-complete absconding of the filmic narrator. This absconding takes place at each of the three levels mentioned by Gunning: at the level of the profilmic, there is a failure to meaningfully coordinate the action in front of the camera, or a reduction to a single element—say the Empire State Building at dusk, or a man eating a mushroom. At the level of the enframed image, Warhol’s camera is drearily static (as in, say, *Empire*), or deviates incoherently, failing to keep the image in place and the soundtrack audible (as in, say, *Lonesome Cowboys*). And at the level of editing, Warhol’s filmic narrator frequently withdraws completely, letting the reel run out, failing to meaningfully shape the recorded material. While many of these effects are precisely *effects*, belying their willful organization, they create the impression of a lazy or delinquent filmic narrator, passive in relation to the spectacle it seems more to **register** than to **relate**. “This is my favorite theme in movie making—” said Warhol, “just watching something happening for two hours or so.”

(Effects this passivity is of course one of Warhol’s signature moves: the “erasure of authorship,” as David E. James observes, was “his most characteristic authorial gesture.”)

The technical bareness of Warhol’s films expresses the will-to-passivity, the cultivated dereliction, of the Warholian filmic narrator. (By contrast, Rubin’s and Smith’s films’ technical failings convey a Bacchanalian abandon, an improvisational urgency that will not submit to the stultifying exigencies of technique.) But the filmic narrator of *Falling in Love… with Chris and Greg* performs neither the self-subtraction of Warhol nor the chaotic abandon of Rubin’s *Christmas on Earth* or Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*. In contrast to these earlier queer works, the filmic narrator of Vargas’ and Youmans’ web series deploys (however clumsily) a relatively conventional set of narrative strategies. In the manner of a sitcom, each episode deals with a particular issue and follows a narrative arc of crisis and resolution through an alternation of conventional filming and editing modes (shot, reverse-shot, close-up, establishing shot), albeit meagerly set up and unevenly lit. Here there is neither a gleeful abandonment of the requirements of craft nor their consummate fulfillment, nor their stylized exaggeration in the form of camp. The filmic narrator of *Chris and Greg* is an active story-teller, neither ostentatious nor negligent, shaping scenes without much evident concern for so-called
“production values” but filling them with characters and situations that have narrative consistency, if not narrative finesse according to conventional standards.

The effect of all this could be simply that the series seems “bad,” which was the verdict of some of the graduate students I showed it to recently in a seminar on “queer love.” Or else—and this is Juhasz’s view—the modal divagations of the filmic narrator, its failure to cohere as a meta-perspective, might precipitate a “vague, if giddy unknowing,” an epistemological crisis that is culture-wide: “We no longer believe that we can know: what someone means, what someone believes, what someone is trying to say, what we might do.” That “no longer” invokes a prior moment that has been lost. “Modernist” irony—so the argument goes—used to be critical; it served to critique and to rouse, even to provoke dissent. Irony, in other words, was (and this “was” also means ought to be) pedagogically and politically useful. Today, however, we are in “ironic free-fall,” and the potential for doing radical, critical work has fallen victim to the collapse of a coherently differentiated narrative perspective.

Jameson, albeit in a less polemical vein, makes a similar argument about what distinguishes the “well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche” from earlier (modernist) forms of irony. Whereas the modernist text produces a reflexive and critical distance within itself, pastiche is a neutral practice of… mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs.

“[W]ithout”; “devoid of”; “amputated”; “blind”: Jameson’s description of (postmodern) pastiche piles up negative prepositions and metaphors of loss like the wreckage before Benjamin’s Angel of History. What has been lost, once again, is the use-value of criticality. The postmodernist text emerges as perverse, even diabolical, in that its mimicry has no (critical) end (recall Freud’s definition of perversion as a lingering over intermediate processes). Jameson’s “statue with blind eyeballs” combines obscene corporeality (“eyeballs”) and functionlessness (“blind”) in a figure of literal petrifaction. It is by no means incidental that the author of Postmodernism should first associate this new cultural logic with the queer figure of Warhol, whose Diamond Dust Shoes, he writes, in stark contrast to Van Gogh’s boots, are “as shorn of their earlier life world as the pile of shoes left over from Auschwitz,” and whose “deathly quality… mortifies the reified eye of the viewer.”

Chris and Greg does not quite conform to Jameson’s mortiferous description of pastiche, because at least one of the “abnormal tongues” it borrows speaks in the language of parody and satire. I have been arguing that that mode is not consistently maintained, with the result that the distance of the parodic or satirical narration from what it narrates—the distance of Austen’s No One from the characters it puts “under its correction”—fails to be coherently established. This, ultimately, is the anxiety that surfaces in critiques of postmodernism: while the (‘modernist’) satirical or parodic narrator forms a useful pair with, by remaining distinct from, what it narrates, what hangs over postmodern texts like Chris and Greg is the possibility of a narration that is not successfully pedagogical, a useless irony, as devoid of faculties, as non-reproductive, as a blind statue. Critically productive modernist irony has been corroded by what Sontag calls the “capitulations embodied in the idea of the ‘post-modern’,” corroded, that is, by a postmodernist irony which in relation to its modernist predecessor takes the form of a sterile queer double.
Real transcendental buffoonery

Taking a different tack, Steven Shaviro’s recent work celebrates this collapse of textual distance, which he describes variously as the end of transgression, the confirmation of the Kantian principle of the uselessness of art, and—in a promising formulation—the advent of “a reflexivity that does not operate on a meta-level, but is immanent to the situation upon which it reflects.” In Shaviro’s analysis, the erosion of meta-perspective would be the cultural corollary to the fact that “there is no longer an ‘outside’ to power,” a formulation he borrows from Hardt and Negri—which is to say, no outside to capitalism. All of this spells the end, the anachronism, not only of transcendence and transgression but also of “negativity,” in place of which he celebrates—in works like Spring Breakers and The Canyons—the “sublime” immersion in a system of immanent intensities from which dissent, that act of negation, now appears impossible.

I disagree with Shaviro (speaking of negation!) that the only viable function of art today is to offer the “satisfaction and relief,” if it can be called that, of “telling us that we have finally hit bottom, finally realized the worst.” In fact, I would argue that the films he champions are precisely the ones most riven by the “absolute infinite negativity” of irony—which is to say, finally, the negativity of the signifier.

The negativity of the signifier is a theoretical concept at odds with the notion of a closed system (call it global finance capitalism) that can do nothing more than give itself over to the sublime (aesthetic) intensification of its immanent intensities. It is also a concept at odds with the idea that art might serve to “playfully address points of contention within queer communities,” which is the anodyne goal the website for Falling in Love... with Chris and Greg attributes to the series. On the contrary, it is my view that in its complication of sincerity and satire, its apparent failure of seriousness, the series corrodes false pieties (including that one), creating—through the negativity of irony, the act or fact of textuality—a reality that is not realtight, not self-identical, and not, pace Shaviro, a closed system that can do nothing but “devour... its entire body, in order to achieve even greater levels of monstrosity.” Chris and Greg demonstrates that to subject to an ironic corrosion the “meta” itself—that spatial distinction between the filmic narrator and its narrative—is not to abolish negativity or its political form, dissent (such an abolition is itself a negation). On the contrary, it is to effect a shift of registers, a parabasis, that is negativity’s textual mode of “appearing.”

Ultimately this commitment to an irony that lacks the distance of “modernist” irony is itself a kind of style, which Sontag describes as “the principle of decision in a work of art, the signature of the artist’s will.” Everything I have just said might seem to suggest that it is precisely this principle that is in abeyance in Chris and Greg, in which the filmic narrator seems to lack a signature as well as a will. Yet in its temporal lags, its technical lapses, its shifts of register, its awkward silences, its mash-up of incompatible discourses, its absurdism and bathos, which is to say in its way of attending to the world, Chris and Greg evinces an “intensity and authority and wisdom” that Sontag associates, finally, with a work’s seriousness. A work’s style, writes Sontag, transcending its more or less contingent details, expresses a relation to the world that brackets the means-end interest of our worldly emplacement, and that in so doing might evince “grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness.” These qualities are not incompatible—on the contrary—with what Schlegel called the “real transcendental buffoonery” by virtue of which some texts “breathe in their entirety, and in every detail, the divine breath of irony.” Indeed, it is its commitment to such buffoonery that ultimately makes Chris and Greg a serious work, without that seriousness saving us from the “error,
madness, and simpleminded stupidity” that shine, as Schlegel also confoundingly asserts, through the most authentic speech.

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Notes

Thanks to John David Rhodes, and to the students in the seminar on “Queer Love” at the University of Michigan, who watched the entire series of Falling in Love… with Chris and Greg and discussed it with me with “grace, intelligence, expressiveness, energy, sensuousness.”

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBAtAM7vtgc&feature=hp
4 One could pursue here the complexities these circuits of parody introduce into the two texts’ respective treatment of gender and sexuality, a treatment that is bound up (so to speak) in these complexities. Arguably, Kanye and Kim’s over-the-top antics expose the performativity of what Judith Butler famously called the “heterosexual matrix,” making it a “queerer” text than Franco and Rogan’s allegedly “queer” parody, which for its part presumes the inherent comedy value—inextricable from the grotesqueness—of the male-male sex it stages as a “joke.” The difficulty of pinning either of the texts to the reading I have just suggested, however, illustrates the problem Juhasz is attempting to diagnose.
6 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” in Against Interpretation, 290.
7 Ibid.
8 Sontag, “Afterword,” 312.
9 Ibid., 311.
11 In this essay I focus on Juhasz because I am interested in her way of relating this observation to queer media, but the same phenomenon is explored in much greater detail, most famously, by Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1989) and Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony (New York: Routledge, 1994).
14 http://fallinginlovewithchrisandgreg.com/index.html
16 Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 259. Jameson takes it to be, as such, the “supreme theoretical concept and value of
traditional modernism” and a value or mode that has been surpassed or transformed (while preserved — sublated) in postmodernism.

17 It is worth quoting the text that surrounds this phrase: “There is a machine there, a text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness… which inhabits words on the level of the play of the signifier, which undoes any narrative consistency of lines… There is no narration without reflection, no narrative without dialectic, and what irony disrupts… is precisely that dialectic and that reflexivity.” De Man, “Irony,” 181.

18 De Man, “Irony,” 177; 179. Cf Jameson on the irony of the fact that de Man’s students couldn’t see the irony in his wartime writings, Postmodernism, 256-259.

19 De Man, “Irony,” 181.

20 Wayne Booth, commenting on Kierkegaard’s definition, writes: “Irony in itself opens up doubts as soon as its possibility enters our heads, and there is no inherent reason for discontinuing the process of doubt at any point short of infinity,” A Rhetoric of Irony (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 59. n.14, also cited in de Man, “Irony,” 166. Booth’s project, as de Man points out, is precisely to put a stop to this “infinite regress” before it reaches infinity.


22 This description is from the series’ website:
http://fallinginlovewithchrisandgreg.com/pages/episodes.html

23 http://strangebedfellowsexhibition.wordpress.com/2013/04/29/crushing-on-chris-greg-a-curators-interview/


25 This, for Friedrich Schlegel, is what “shines through” what he calls “authentic language” (reelle Sprache). See de Man, 180-181.


27 Among the many comparable contemporary examples of the latter, consider the satirical queer Internet series The Damiana Files, at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL83A1D809FB83C55C, or Drew DrEDGE’s impersonations of Chloe Sevigny, for example at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-LRITaHUbI


29 Kanye’s Bound 2, to return to that comparison, involves multiple instances of musical parabasis, for example when an abrupt shift occurs from the opening piano chord refrain to the sampled “Ah ha, honey,” and then another to Kanye’s vocals layered over the sample from the Ponderosa Twins’ original 1971 Bound.

30 http://fallinginlovewithchrisandgreg.com/pages/OCanada.html


36 Ibid., 71.

37 Ibid.

http://fallinginlovewithchrisandgreg.com/pages/RoadTrip.html

38 Sonntag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” 286.


41 For example, the distinctions drawn by Richard Dyer, who provides a rigorous taxonomy in Pastiche (London: Routledge, 2007).

42 D.A. Miller, “On the Universality of Brokeback,” Film Quarterly 63 (Spring 2007): 50-60; 52.


46 David E. James, “Andy Warhol: The Producer as Author,” in Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 64. He took a similar approach with interviews: “The interviewer should just tell me the words he wants me to say and I’ll repeat them after him. I think that would be so great because I’m so empty I just can’t think of anything to say.” Gretchen Berg, “Nothing to Lose,” in Michael O’Pray (ed.), Andy Warhol Film Factory (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 61. Put differently, the artist here renounces the “will” that Sonntag says is expressed in style. That renunciation is of course itself a style.


48 Ibid.

49 Jameson, Postmodernism, 16.

50 Ibid., 17.

51 Perversion comprises “sexual activities which either (a) extend, in anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim.” Sigmund Freud, “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” in James Strachey (ed. and trans.), The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 7 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), p. 150.

Sontag, “Afterword,” 310.


Shaviro, “Accelerationist Aesthetics,” n.p. In this essay, which I admire a lot, Shaviro champions “accelerationist art” as that which is adequate to the inexorability of global finance capital in understanding that “[there is no longer an ‘outside’ to power.” Thus, “[w]here transgressive modernist art sought to break free from social constraints, and thereby to attain some radical Outside, accelerationist art remains entirely immanent, modulating its intensities in place.”

Ibid., n.p.

Shaviro, Post-Cinematic Affect, 31.

Sontag, “On Style,” 32. John David Rhodes writes, in a similar vein, that style is “an imposition of the will on the world, and in a manner that has not been prescribed” (“Belabored,” 59). For Rhodes it is this “not prescribed” quality of the work that is crucial. The work of art, he writes in a felicitous formulation to which I am indebted, is “the embodiment… of an action that has been taken in relation to the real, and of the unpredictable consequences of this action, this making” (ibid.).

Ibid., 36.

Ibid., 25.

In de Man, “Irony,” 177.