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A Field Guide to Imaginary Idiocy

HUGH S. MANON

In Francis Ford Coppola's 1983 film *Rumble Fish*, two troubled young brothers engage in a philosophical discussion while they gaze into a fish tank at a Tulsa, Oklahoma, pet store. The elder brother, whom everyone calls The Motorcycle Boy (Mickey Rourke), explains to the younger, Rusty James (Matt Dillon), that Siamese fighting fish will try to attack their own image when they are shown a mirror: "You know, if you lean a mirror up against the glass, they try to kill themselves fighting their own reflection."

Such behavior in animals is Imaginary in the Lacanian sense—which is not to say that it is a matter of animals daydreaming or conjuring up nonexistent scenarios in their minds. Rather, the response of the fish to their reflection is Imaginary because it is *image driven*, induced by the presence of a likeness. The fact that the scene in the pet store is both the source of the film's title and the only sequence filmed in color (everything in the film except for the vibrant red and turquoise fish is shot in black and white) sets the characters' strange discussion in high relief. It is not difference that drives young men such as these to engage in acts of aggression, but instead a dyadic similarity that induces the violence. Indeed, to anyone who has seen *Rumble Fish*, the mise-en-scène of the film resembles nothing so much as a series of hometown fishbowls, circumscribed arenas of aimlessness and ennui that the characters strain but fail to escape, turning instead to various forms of combat and defensive display.

Judging by their sheer number on social media platforms such as Twitter and Reddit, short videos and gifs of animals "rumbling" with

their own image in a mirror are endlessly amusing to humans. Contemporary meme culture encourages users of social media to trade videos of kittens and puppies panicking as they catch a glimpse of their semblance and responding as if it were another real animal. Part of the point of these brief, decontextualized clips—not unlike The Motorcycle Boy’s thinly veiled existential musing on Siamese fighting fish—is to reveal to viewers the essence of their own subjectivity. When a dog barks at its reflection and scurries away on a slippery floor, or when a cat arches its back in an instinctual gesture of menace, we witness the idiocy of the Imaginary order at its purest, but in a setting in which the stakes for humans are very low. We gain a sense of superiority or mastery by viewing these Imaginary mirror confrontations in a controlled, tamed-down, bestiary form, where the worst that can happen is that a pet slips and falls.

Quite a bit more alarming than these videos of animal behavior is the human experience of being in a strange locale—perhaps as a guest in someone else’s home—and walking down a hallway in the dark, only to unexpectedly encounter one’s reflection in a large mirror. The shock of such an encounter derives from its silence. With no sound to warn us of a human presence, we suddenly see someone *over there*; we possibly jump or gasp in a startled way, but fairly immediately (not gradually, like animals) realize the idiocy of our mistake. Humans find such encounters humorous, but only after the fact, when we may be inclined to share the ridiculousness of our mirror encounter with friends (e.g., over breakfast the next day), just as we do with funny animal videos.

In both cases, scary, mirror-based Imaginary encounters would be of no interest if we were not viewing them from a loftier position, a vantage from which such responses appear laughably stupid. Our amusement derives from a basic ontological contrast: unlike animals, whose reactive posturing is exclusively Imaginary, we humans have the capacity to view the Imaginary from the perspective of the Symbolic and thus to judge Imaginary behaviors as ludicrous or degraded.

A primary goal of this essay is to give this comparatively inferior, essentially dyadic mode of human engagement a name, “Imaginary idiocy,” and to explain through a series of examples how it differs from a second, distinctly human, mode of operation on the order of the Sym-

bolic. As such, what follows is also a meditation on Jacques Lacan's crucial "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" a keystone text that I read for the first time twenty-five years ago, in fall of 1992, and which continues to strongly inform my thinking about cinema, politics, the academy, and other arenas of deception and display.

My use of the word "idiot" derives from a specific passage in "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in which Lacan foregrounds a tale told by Poe's protagonist, C. Auguste Dupin, concerning a schoolboy he once met who had "attracted universal admiration" at the "game of 'even and odd.'" Lacan's particular concern has to do with a strategy whereby it is possible for a skilled player to win the game by appearing to play stupidly on purpose: "But what then of the next level, when my opponent, having recognized that I am intelligent enough to follow him in this move, will manifest his own intelligence in realizing that it is by acting like an idiot [*c'est à faire l'idiot*] that he has his best chance of deceiving me?"¹ The point of this passage is to differentiate between an actually idiotic gambit, in which one player is just intelligent enough to deceive by misdirection, and a truly masterful approach, in which the other player succeeds by purposefully failing. The former is an Imaginary-order deception, the latter Symbolic, and in the discussions that follow, I examine the problems that emerge when humans slip backward from the latter position to the former.

A primary form of Imaginary idiocy emerges when an individual or group is too straightforwardly, or too uncompromisingly, dedicated to maintaining the appearance of slickness, flawlessness, and intelligence, as if this were the only option. At the same time, it is crucial to stress that the particular forms taken by Imaginary idiocy tend to differ, depending on whether they develop in an environment of skepticism, such as magic or gaming, wherein the Imaginary idiot "tries too hard" at his deception, or in environment of display-driven entertainment, such as fashion or graphic arts, in which the Imaginary idiot creates a representation that is too literal and direct. This essay seeks to make this distinction clear through a series of pop-cultural examples—a kind of comparative "field guide" to Imaginary idiocy—in the hopes that such extensive exemplification might awaken some otherwise intelligent people to the Imaginary trap into which they are nonetheless predisposed to fall.

Going Low

An unofficial mantra of the 2016 Hillary Clinton presidential campaign was “when they go low, we go high,” a phrase borrowed from Michelle Obama’s speech to the Democratic National Convention in July 2016, and later repeated by candidate Clinton in the context of various debates, televised interviews, and so forth.² The idea, of course, was that the Democrats needed not only to adopt a position that was morally and intellectually superior to their opponents, but also to avoid engaging in the kind of ad hominem, mean-spirited attacks that the Republicans, and Donald Trump in particular, were known for.

In retrospect, it is clear that Trump won the election not despite his propensity for “going low,” but precisely because of it. This is true both in an ethical sense, inasmuch as he appealed to the fears of voters regarding immigrants, foreign corporations stealing American jobs, and so on, and in a larger structural sense, as he delivered a campaign based on failure, chaos, and uncertainty—a counterintuitive “worse is better” stratagem that flummoxed the Democrats’ dedication to a seemingly obvious, shared American value: that “better is better.” Trump “went low” in the sense that he was willing to risk being judged as impulsive and stupid, even embracing such labels, in order to ensure that Clinton would take her place as the Imaginary idiot in a game of public deception that she failed to realize was taking place on the order of the Symbolic, in which the appearance of stupidity is critical.

A June 2017 *New York Times* article by Eric Anthamatten seeks to tackle the idiocy of Trump’s presidency head-on. Entitled “Trump and the True Meaning of ‘Idiot,’” the brief essay traces both the cultural history of the “village idiot,” as well as the etymology of the word. The obvious point of this reflection on idiocy is that Donald Trump is a classic example of the type. The idiot, Anthamatten contends, has traditionally been understood as “a prepubescent, parasitic solipsist who talks only to himself.” The author continues: “[The idiot] does not understand how he came to be, how he is sustained and how he is part of a larger ecology. The idiot cares nothing about public life, much less public service. The idiot cares only about his own name. The idiot, by way of his actions, can destroy the social body. Eventually, the idiot destroys himself, but in so

doing, potentially annihilates everyone along with him. He is a ticking time bomb in the middle of the public square.”³ Statements such as these establish a fixed definition of idiocy based on character, not a relative or dialectical position that can be changed and manipulated based on the stance of one’s opponent. Yet for reasons I hope to clarify, it was unquestionably Hillary Clinton who unwittingly assumed the role of the Imaginary idiot in the run-up to the 2016 election. Clearly more intelligent, she attempted to “sew up” her already superior campaign with carefully pre-scripted appeals to intelligence and sophisticated demonstrations of knowledge, not realizing that this representation of her experience and thoughtfulness begged to be seen through, as all Imaginary representations do. The trouble with Clinton’s erudition was its susceptibility to being derided as a façade, even though it represented real experience.

In contrast, Donald Trump’s bizarre campaign style lacked substance, was delivered in manifestly unintelligent language, and at times appeared unplanned to the point of farce. As such, it offered nothing to see through and thus won over voters through a process of “double deception.”⁴ At once more and less conniving than Clinton’s approach, Trump’s campaign repeatedly engaged in *lies that deceive by way of the truth*. Such is the nature of Symbolic deception. Whether a calculated insight, an accident of character, or a little of both, Trump’s extreme lack of polish was the furthest thing possible from Imaginary-order slickness, precisely because his gestures, speech, and historical track record unfolded in an endless series of flaws, failures, and scandals. Whereas Clinton was at great pains to appear more savvy and thus kept her guard up, Trump’s guard was perpetually left down. In this way, he was able to engage his audience’s skepticism about politicians, meeting them on the order of the Symbolic through impromptu eruptions of authenticity, rather than trying to rationally convince them through engineered demonstrations of prowess. What Clinton so desperately needed, but could not muster, was the will to fail her way to success, allowing the public to glimpse a little bit of the honest truth behind the Clinton façade, rather than endlessly defending herself against such revelations.

In assessing the Trumpian gambit as a Symbolic double deception, we above all need to be clear that the judgmental assessment “what an idiot!” is always relative to the status of the one doing the judging. In

other words, judgments about idiocy exist *between* two different subjective modes of operation and by definition cannot be discerned by like-minded subjects whose *modus operandi* is shared. Idiocy, in other words, exists only as dialectical antithesis. There is thus no benefit in mapping the historical evolution of idiocy, as Eric Anthamatten does, nor is there any need to delineate etymologies. Idiocy involves an inconsistency that is ahistorical, a quality common to all speaking subjects: the fact that humans capable of language necessarily oscillate between the orders of the Symbolic and the Imaginary. In their daily affairs, humans shift from one to the other mode and are capable of judging the difference between the two, unlike animals, which lack arbitrary language and operate exclusively on the order of the Imaginary. Although the human subject's propensity to slip into Imaginary idiocy is a weakness that can be strategically exploited, it arguably becomes easier for individuals to resist such seductions—or at least engage with them in an appropriately Symbolic way, rather than perpetually “falling for it” by inadvertently assuming the role of the Imaginary dupe—once they are alerted to the basic forms and structures of Symbolic deception.

Donald Trump's most persistent linguistic tic, and one that emblemizes his abilities as a Symbolic-order deceiver, is his tendency to make a bold promise and then follow up by saying “believe me.”⁵ This statement, like all Symbolic deceptions, wins the game in an entirely counterintuitive way. A sentence ending in a “believe me” tag is a classic tactic of the smarmy salesman, a mode of discourse that virtually anyone would view skeptically. However, with Trump, the sheer repetition of the phrase elevates gross smarminess into a kind of signature. Viewed from a position in the Imaginary, the “believe me” tag appears to impugn Trump's trustworthiness, but to his supporters, whose investments in authenticity entail a Symbolic-order skepticism regarding anything that is too polished, “believe me” marks his status as a raw, unpracticed, seat-of-his-pants amateur politician in a field of professional deceivers.

In his penchant for blatant salesmanship and self-implication, Trump recapitulates the classical admission-based strategy of Epimenides the Cretan, who proclaims that “All Cretans are liars.” Lacan explains the strategic utility of this paradox: “He wants . . . to unsettle you by truthfully warning you about his method . . . [T]his has the same success as an-

other procedure which consists in announcing one's own proclivity for rudeness, that one is absolutely frank. [Epimenedes] is the kind of guy who suggests to you that you should endorse all his bluffing."⁶ We do not typically believe someone who says "believe me," because being explicitly prompted to "believe" entails an admission that there is reason to be skeptical in the first place. However, as with Epimenides' self-applicable proclamation, it is precisely against a backdrop of skepticism that such an admission becomes compelling, rather than damning. In the context of warring presidential campaigns, when all candidates are making lofty promises and trying to win voters, deception is perpetually in the offing. Everyone knows this. Because audiences are already skeptical, a presidential campaign seems like a context in which no one in their right mind would repeatedly say "believe me." Yet the statement is so blunt—like Epimenides' proclamation, so "absolutely frank"—that as soon as we hear "believe me," our belief is not undermined, but redoubled. The phrase becomes credible not as a deception, but as an unpolished nugget of real truth—a discursive indicator that the speaker is unsophisticated in the ways of the political elite and thus refreshingly authentic, trustworthy, "like us."

On various occasions Lacan explicitly, if hyperbolically, regards Imaginary-order practices as "imbecilic" and a kind of "cretinism," but the clear implication is that such idiocy is far from exceptional; even the most intelligent among us are guilty of such behavior, and regularly so. The rise of Donald Trump is significant in Lacanian terms because it makes clear that there is not necessarily a direct relation between high intelligence and Symbolic-order deception. Correspondingly, Trump's defeat of Clinton underscores the fact that the Imaginary idiot need not be the stupider of the two in any given exchange. The fact that Trump was and is significantly less intelligent than Clinton, yet nonetheless attracted enough voters to win the presidency by "acting like an idiot," certifies that in certain circumstances the best strategy—that is, the one that stands the greatest chance of seducing and deceiving humans—is precisely the worst strategy, a kind of calculated moronism. As I go on to explain in the following section, such double deception is at the center of Lacan's argument concerning the Minister's first encounter with Dupin in the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter.'"

Dupin's Cool Green Glasses

Whereas animals are fully capable of various forms of misrepresentation, their simulacra are exclusively limited to the Imaginary order. For instance, animals may leave false tracks, mimic the appearance of other animals, bury their waste (as cats do in a litter box), or play dead. Lacan discusses animal mimicry in a whole range of contexts, but is always quick to note that “an animal does not feign feigning. It does not make tracks whose deceptiveness lies in getting them to be taken as false, when in fact they are true—that is, tracks that indicate the right trail.”⁷ Only humans who have acquired language are capable of such Symbolic-order double deception. However, this ability to trick one's opponent by failing to trick them comes at a cost for humans, who suffer from a profound ontological inconsistency. Unlike animals, humans inevitably fluctuate or pass between the orders of the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

Popular cinema—and especially the genre of the psychological thriller—is fond of reminding us that it is entirely possible for a subject who fancies himself a master of the Symbolic to lapse into Imaginary behaviors and attitudes, often at his peril. A case in point is John Baxter (Donald Sutherland), the self-satisfied but finally idiotic protagonist of Nicholas Roeg's revisionist Gothic thriller *Don't Look Now* (1973). Some time following the drowning death of their young daughter, John and his wife Laura (Julie Christie) reside in Venice, where John oversees the restoration of a medieval church. Early in the film, Laura makes contact with two mysterious English sisters, Wendy (Clelia Matania) and Heather (Hilary Mason); the opaque grey eyes of the latter denote both her blindness and her abilities as a psychic who can “see” beyond death. When Heather purports to have had a vision of the Baxters' daughter, Laura is heartened by this news, and her formerly depressed demeanor noticeably improves. John, however, is highly skeptical of the sisters' motives and purported abilities, describing psychic discourse as “mumbo-jumbo.” Laura retorts by saying that he's got it all wrong, and that the sisters themselves are skeptics: “They disapprove of the mumbo-jumbo, too. They used that very word.”

John replies coolly, “Of course they do,” making it clear that he doesn't want to have anything to do with psychics and that he is well aware of how

such deceptive schemers seduce their mark. The couple's brief squabble is easy to overlook, but their exchange highlights the presence of a blind spot in the Symbolic that culminates in the high irony of the film's notorious climax. In a strong sense, John's dismissive statement, "Of course they do," represents the classic stance of the cynic. In the cynic's eyes, not only are deceivers deceptive, but they are also apt to point out the flaws in well-known deceptions as a way of saying "we can all agree that, sadly, deceptive schemes exist, but we ourselves are not deceptive; we are the real thing." John feels confident in having discerned, and thus bested, the dialectical double deception of the psychics via his own calculus about how Symbolic deception works. His downfall, however, is triggered not by discourse, but by an encounter with an impossibly dyadic apparition.

John Baxter is not an Imaginary dupe—not wholly an idiot—at least for the bulk of the film's second act. However, the fact that he understands how psychics "work their audience" ultimately does nothing to protect him when, late in the film, he physically (not psychically) sees a diminutive figure roaming the streets of Vienna in a red raincoat, a figure that uncannily resembles his deceased daughter, whom we have seen in a number of flashback sequences. John pursues the figure like a hound on the scent of a fox, and in a moment of horrendous Imaginary unveiling, he comes face-to-face with what the red coat conceals—not the ghost of his daughter, but a grotesque old female dwarf, who murders John on the spot with a meat cleaver. The point of this turnabout is that even the most hardened, world-weary cynic cannot be consistently or constantly skeptical, and that to chase after answers in a straightforward way, or to believe too much in dyadic Imaginary resemblances, always risks succumbing to a kind of myopia.

Lacan's archetype for such Imaginary slippage into blindness is the unnamed Minister D— in Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Purloined Letter" (1845). As is well known to any student of Poe or Lacan, the Minister's initially brilliant gambit, and the one that utterly baffles the Prefect of Police and his men, is to leave the scandalous letter he has stolen from the Queen out in the open, plainly visible in a pasteboard card rack hanging from the mantelpiece. To use Poe's term, the letter's position is "hyper-obtrusive"; it sticks out, asking to be seen.⁸ Yet for this very reason, the police, who are looking for something craftily hidden,

cannot see it. The concealment of the letter in plain sight is a perfect example of Symbolic-order double deception, a lie that deceives by way of the truth. Before he ever arrives at the Minister's apartment, Dupin suspects that such a deception may be forthcoming, and in order to look around without being seen, he dons semi-opaque green spectacles. A great deal may be gained by probing the purpose of Dupin's green glasses, for it is these instruments of covert seeing that lull the Minister back into a vulnerable state of Imaginary blindness, despite his initially strong penetrating vision on the order of the Symbolic.

When Poe's archetypal master detective arrives at the apartment of the Minister in order to retrieve the eponymous "purloined letter," Dupin is wearing sunglasses and is doing so indoors. The image is in some ways a performance of campy masquerade. The following is Lacan's summary of the meeting: "Dupin calls on the Minister. The latter greets him with a show of nonchalance, affecting in his conversation romantic ennui. Meanwhile Dupin, who is not taken in by this feigning, inspects the premises, his eyes protected by green spectacles. When his gaze alights upon a very chafed letter—which seems to have been abandoned in a compartment of a wretched, eye-catching, trumpery card-rack of pasteboard, hanging right smack in the middle of the mantelpiece—he already knows that he has found what he was looking for."⁹ What is the function of these green spectacles and on what order—Imaginary or Symbolic—are they operating? In the story, Poe makes Dupin's motivation clear by way of an explanation from the detective himself: "*To be even with him*, I complained of my weak eyes, and lamented the necessity of the spectacles."¹⁰ But the two scheming men are far from even at this moment. As both Poe and Lacan stress, Dupin is an unparalleled master of the art of detection who understands human actions in Symbolic terms, whereas the minister, whose gamesmanship is initially strong, gets lazy and a bit too comfortable when Dupin arrives, lapsing into an Imaginary mode of deception that Dupin can easily see through and exploit.

If, in wearing the green glasses indoors, Dupin would seem to arouse suspicion rather than quelling it, this is precisely his gambit. Ostensibly he needs to hide his eyes so that the Minister cannot see him scanning the apartment for the stolen letter. In this regard, the glasses provide a

portable “blind” in the sense that a duck hunter employs the term, with the Minister as the inauspicious mallard. Yet, more important to Dupin’s success is the glasses’ role as a signifier of overt feigning. One wears sunglasses, in Poe’s time as today, not only in order to see the world more comfortably, or to guard one’s eyes from being seen by others, but also *to be seen hiding* one’s eyes. Sunglasses are in this sense a self-evident Imaginary power play, positioning the bespectacled seer, whose eyes are dramatically veiled, as dominant over the seen. But we need to be clear that although Dupin in this moment engages at the level of the Imaginary, it is always with the Symbolic in mind. Can we take Dupin at his word when he states outright that his goal in wearing green glasses is “to be even with” the Minister? And would this entail a raising or a lowering?

I want to argue that Dupin’s glasses are, in the final analysis, not at all a marker of overt domination. Dupin’s approach is nothing like that of the walking boss Godfrey (Morgan Woodward) in *Cool Hand Luke* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1967), the “man with no eyes” who oversees the prison work crew and whose prominent mirrored sunglasses are an emblem of his panoptic power. Dupin no doubt needs to have a look around, but the point of the green glasses is not to show the Minister that Dupin “owns” him via his obscured gaze, but instead to situate everything at the level of appearances. The glasses in this way represent a visible step down, out of the realm of intellectual riposte and into the realm of vapid posturing. Immediately seen through by the Minister as the garb of a wily detective, the glasses dissimulate the fact that Dupin has completed all his ratiocination in advance and knows precisely how, if not exactly where, the letter is being concealed. Because Dupin has already deduced that the letter must be hidden in plain sight, his task on arriving has nothing to do with seeking it out. Instead, he need only show up, chat a bit with the Minister, signal to him (via the glasses) that the two are on par with one another as somewhat aloof, appearance-conscious deceivers, and wait for the letter to reveal itself.

Recall that, in Lacan’s words, the Minister greets Dupin “with a show of nonchalance, affecting in his conversation romantic ennui.”¹¹ In his calculated listlessness, the Minister is acting “cool,” despite the tense, potentially life-threatening, treasonous decision he has made to blackmail the

Queen. Everything in the realm of the social that counts as “coolness,” I want to argue, is a form of Imaginary idiocy. By contrast, what Symbolic deception demands is, in a context where coolness is commonly expected, to fail at acting cool. Coolness is a façade, usually a misrepresentation of insecurity, but one that can easily be seen through. To fail intentionally at coolness—instead appearing pointedly inept, foolish, or flustered—is to require one’s beholder to *see through seeing through*, a Symbolic double reversal that many will fail to execute. The tableau at the Minister’s apartment highlights this crucial, if paradoxical, distinction: that whereas acting cool involves a logical inversion (i.e., we impress by not attempting to impress), in a skeptical exchange, where deception is to be expected, acting cool is an erroneous strategy, a form of Imaginary idiocy (i.e., we attempt to cover up our nervousness by acting blasé and thus appear to be hiding something).

In donning the glasses, Dupin plays it cool, enacting the role of the perspicacious and conniving detective—a figure that twentieth-century slang will later refer to as a “peeper” or “private eye.” He comports himself as if to cover over the fact that he has something to hide and, in doing so, does nothing to upset the Minister’s assumptions about how a wily detective would appear or act. In the eyes of the Minister, the green glasses are just “Dupin being Dupin.” The reader, however, is encouraged to note the glasses’ pretentious, quasi-theatrical function, with “Dupin *playing* Dupin” in a calculatedly flawed way. At this moment of encounter between the two men, and with the green glasses as a point of focus, the Minister engages *mano a mano* at the level of the Imaginary, and thus loses the battle of wits, whereas Dupin, who only ever appears to be an Imaginary dupe, wins the day by feigning weakness and purposefully failing to conceal. Returning to Lacan:

[I]f, now as before, the point is to protect the letter from inquisitive eyes, [the Minister] cannot help but employ the same technique he himself already foiled: that of leaving it out in the open. And we may legitimately doubt that he thus knows what he is doing when we see him suddenly captivated by a dyadic relationship, in which we find all the features of a mimetic lure or of an animal playing dead, and caught in the trap of the typical-

ly imaginary situation of seeing that he is not seen, leading him to misconstrue the real situation in which he is seen not seeing. And what does he fail to see? The very symbolic situation which he himself was so able to see, and in which he is now seen seeing himself not being seen.¹²

Dupin is a master of the Symbolic in a steadfast, unflagging way, whereas the Minister fails in his attempt at extortion precisely because his commitment to Symbolic-order deception is inconsistent. When Dupin strategically backslides into the Imaginary by playing it cool and wearing opaque green glasses, the Minister is “suddenly captivated” and follows his lead. But instead of momentarily performing coolness, as Dupin does, the Minister *actually becomes* calm and unconcerned, and does so at his peril. This problem of Imaginary slippage is a tendency for all humans in day-to-day life, and as I go on to explain, such idiocy opens up possibilities of exploitation on the one hand, and raptport on the other.

Double Deceptive Raptport

For humans, it is entirely possible for randomness to be “too random” and thus fail at appearing natural. If a tile contractor lays faux-wood flooring in too regular an arrangement, repeating a pattern with mathematical precision, the result can be an appearance of falseness when compared to real wood flooring, which is naturally irregular. Likewise, if one happens to be a serial killer, to fail to incorporate isolated flaws into one’s deception can lead to a failure of naturalism and thus risk capture by agents of the law who are trained to detect patterns, as well as deliberate non-patterns. In Jonathan Demme’s masterwork, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) inscribes on a large, printed roadmap a handwritten note to Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) indicating the locations where serial killer Buffalo Bill’s victims were found: “Clarice, doesn’t this random scattering of sites seem desperately random? Like the elaboration of a bad liar. Ta, Hannibal Lecter.” The idea of deception proffered by Lecter echoes a logic we hear repeatedly in classic film noir: a deception can fail in its simulation, and ultimately be detected, if that deception is “too perfect.”

A similar double deceptive logic is at play in *Manhunter* (Michael Mann, 1986), an earlier adaptation from the same series of Hannibal Lecter novels by Thomas Harris. In *Manhunter*, FBI agent Will Graham (William Petersen) sets up an interview with Freddy Lounds (Stephen Lang), a reporter for the *Tattler* tabloid. Graham's goal in the interview is to bait the notorious "Tooth Fairy" killer out of hiding. To guarantee the veracity of the interview for his readers, Lounds insists on a photograph of the two of them together. "C'mon," Lounds says, "you want this to look real or not?" Despite detesting Lounds for his sleazy opportunism, Graham agrees to the photo, but with one stipulation. The two are standing in front of a large glass window overlooking a part of Washington, DC, when Graham says to the photographer, "Make sure the theater sign across the street is just slightly out of focus. We want him to be able to read it so he can find it, but we don't want to look too obvious." At play here is a kind of Barnumesque misdirection at the level of photographic form. The picture of the two men is staged—a strategic ploy to let the killer know Graham's whereabouts—but the trick of its framing is to let the killer discover the location for himself, without it seeming like this information has been planted for him to find. In other words, the image needs to deliver a naturalistic simulacrum, inclusive of flaws, instead of a canny realist deception, which runs the risk of appearing "too perfect."

The notion that the most sophisticated intersubjective strategist must be willing to fail on purpose is the basis for Lacan's discussion of the "game of even and odd" that Dupin finds so instructive in Poe's story. For both Dupin and Lacan, the highest form of Symbolic deception involves a gesture in which the truth is really revealed, and the skeptical onlooker misses it. The height of the illusionist's art, Lacan insists, would thus involve "the prestidigitator repeating his trick before our eyes, without deluding us into thinking that he is divulging his secret to us this time, but taking his gamble even further by really shedding light on it for us without us seeing a thing."¹³ In the hierarchy of deceptive practice, this is the riskiest of gambits: actually telling the truth in anticipation of one's disclosure being taken as a lie. But this is not to negate a less chancy, more common form of Symbolic deception in which falseness and artifice—which are normally traits of the Imaginary—nonetheless play a role.

This fine distinction between ordinary and “high-flying” forms of Symbolic deception is critical to understanding Lacan’s appropriation of Poe, and will benefit from a point-by-point enumeration, explicating the three possible strategies an illusionist might employ in his stage act:

LEVEL 1 is purely Imaginary deception, employed only by amateurs, foolish magicians, and young children.

The concept: An illusion can “trick” its audience on the basis of straightforward technique or pure skill.

The assumption: The audience is not especially skeptical about magic.

The execution: The illusionist practices his trick extensively and performs it skillfully, without couching the performance in an “insider” discussion of how magic tricks really work.

The result: The trick either impresses its audience on the basis of pure skill, or it does not.

LEVEL 2 is ordinary Symbolic deception, employed by skilled illusionists as a kind of standard practice.

The concept: An illusion can more effectively seduce and deceive its audience by appearing (but *only* appearing) to admit a truth.

The assumption: The audience is skeptical about magic.

The execution: The illusion involves an initial explanatory stage in which some aspect of a magician’s technique is seemingly revealed; the audience is thus invited to take its place “on the inside” with the illusionist.

The result: The illusionist actively seduces the audience by granting it an insider knowledge that is ultimately false; meanwhile, the actual trick has been perpetuated in some other manner or in some other place.

LEVEL 3 is extraordinary Symbolic deception (described by Lacan in the original French as “de haute volée,” top-flight or high-flying), employed by masters of the form and perhaps more prevalent in fiction than in real-world performances.

The concept: The most profound illusion allows an audience to

deceive itself when the illusionist openly admits how the illusion is actually done.

The assumption: The audience is skeptical about magic and understands that strategic revelations of “inside knowledge” are standard practice for illusionists.

The execution: The illusionist *actually* reveals the truth of the illusion, rather than pretending to do so. In effect, skeptical audience members are passively granted the opportunity to trick themselves.

The result: The audience anticipates a deceptive revelation, mistakes the illusionist’s real revelation for a false one, and thus fails to see how the illusion is being perpetuated.

Such a schematization is widely portable, and could be applied to intersubjective deceptions of various sorts, both in fiction and in real life. But as I go on to explain, a great deal can be gained by understanding this third, aggressively passive type of Symbolic deception as the order on which appears the ubiquitous and highly necessary mode of intersubjective engagement that humans call “rapport.”

For an example of rapport as a deliberately failed lie—a hidden truth that is passively “leaked,” rather than being too closely guarded—consider the 2016 science fiction film *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve), the plot of which concerns the first contact between the people of Earth and an alien race. Early in the film, we learn that a US military force is participating in a multinational effort to communicate with the aliens, whose giant ships are hovering just above the ground at various points on the globe. Although hesitant to involve herself with the military, protagonist Louise Banks (Amy Adams) agrees under pressure to relocate to a make-shift Army outpost where she will spearhead the translation team.

After some rudimentary attempts to communicate with the large, squid-like aliens, Banks is pressed for results by Colonel Weber (Forest Whitaker); he wants to know why her team is not making any progress at translating the aliens’ sounds. In response, Banks recounts for Weber a famous story about linguistic mistranslation: “In 1770, Captain James Cook’s ship ran aground off the coast of Australia, and he led a party into the country, and they met the aboriginal people. One of the sailors

pointed at the animals that hop around with their babies in their pouch, and he asked what they were, and the aborigines said ‘kangaroo.’ It wasn’t until later that they learned that ‘kangaroo’ means ‘I don’t understand.’” Weber pauses to digest what Banks has said, agrees to stave off the pressure from his superiors a bit longer, and leaves the room. Banks breathes a deep sigh of relief.

Physicist Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner), who has been listening in the background, chimes in, “It’s a good story.”

“Thanks,” Banks replies, “It’s not true. . . . but it proves my point.”

From the standpoint of the evolving story world, Banks’ admission to Donnelly of her deception is crucial because it cements her veracity and absolute trustworthiness, both with him—a fellow academic/scientist whose trust she most needs—and also with the viewer. Lying can be convincing, but feeling free to let slip a hidden truth for the benefit of one’s peers is something more: it is the essence of rapport.

Such double deceptive admissions are a natural part of everyday discourse on the street, in classrooms, and in all manner of workplace interactions. A nonfictional example of collegial rapport, occurring in real time and on the fly, appears in the 2016 documentary *Obit.* (Vanessa Gould), a film that investigates the practices, quirks, and personal philosophies of obituary writers who work at the *New York Times*. In the context of a sequence about the pressures of working to deadline, the film includes a light-hearted exchange between Bruce Weber, an obituary writer, and his superior Bill McDonald, the obituaries desk editor. Seated at his desk, Weber reads aloud from the computer screen his lede about a recently deceased campaign manager for John F. Kennedy who was instrumental in polishing Kennedy’s image for his famous 1960 debate with Richard Nixon. Broadcast nationally from Chicago, this was the first-ever televised presidential debate in US history, and it markedly changed the way presidential images are handled.

Weber’s lede for the obituary is beautifully written but exceptionally lengthy. “Now,” Weber says, “the question is whether the editors will allow me to go two fairly lengthy paragraphs before getting to the name of the guy who died. However, I would argue that it’s in the headline and that, you know, really we’re writing about this because of the history.” At roughly this point, Weber gestures across the divider between his cubicle

and the next one, where editor Bill McDonald, who we cannot yet see, is apparently sitting. Weber continues: "So, I'm actually practicing right now for the argument that I'm going to have with Bill in about twenty minutes."

McDonald's eyes pop up above the divider, "I'm hearing this. I'm hearing this."

Weber grins. "I know you are. I did that on purpose."

The exchange is the epitome of free-flowing office camaraderie and points to a structure that is essential to such rapport: the possibility of saying something with the expectation that it will be overheard, not as part of a stupidly coy, Imaginary-order deception, but as part of a Symbolic maneuver in which the subject freely admits to the other that *some things are meant to be overheard*, meant to be admitted as such. In such an exchange, everything is out on the table: the non-surreptitious rehearsal of the argument, the acknowledgment that it has been overheard, the explicit confession that the "leak" was purposeful, and finally the lack of any voiced objection to such scheming, signaling that this is all a kind of playful, comfortably candid banter.

Indeed, we might venture the claim that anything that qualifies as "rapport" must be grounded in such deliberate admissions, slips, and failures, underscoring the fact that Symbolic-order deception is never exactly deception per se. The dialogue of the two newsmen above all signals an intersubjective bond between coworkers in which a certain level of deceptiveness and slick coercion is expected: *I know that you know that I know* that you fully expect me to rehearse my "pitch" before the editorial meeting, in which I will (of course) attempt to convince you to bend your rules for me. Everything goes smoothly because both parties engage on the same convoluted level. Why is it important to note that this is how rapport develops and functions? Quite simply because there exist numerous real-world scenarios in which rapport would be desirable, yet the Imaginary impulse to *impress by feigning impressiveness* often gets in the way of true rapport, which hinges on one's willingness to fail with aplomb. To think rapport develops by advancing an Imaginary affirmation of one's own flawlessness, or by not letting down one's guard, would be to fail at generating rapport from the outset.

The 1993 action-thriller *The Fugitive* (Andrew Davis) involves a scene

that rightly suggests that rapport can develop surprisingly quickly, and across barriers of official rank, provided that both interlocutors are on the same (Symbolic) level. Prior to the scene in question, Dr. Richard Kimble (Harrison Ford) has been pursued by federal marshals for a crime he did not commit: the murder of his wife. Shortly after the violent crash of a prison bus, from which he and others escape, Kimble enters a local hospital in order to attend to his wounds and give himself an antibiotic shot in a treatment room. As he does so, we see an Illinois state trooper enter the building in a parallel shot sequence; he is a clear threat to Kimble's clandestine activities. Kimble's information and photograph arrive by fax and are given to the trooper by a nurse.

Back in the treatment room, Kimble needs to change his appearance so he can flee unnoticed. He enters the washroom of an elderly male patient, takes the patient's clothes from the closet, and puts them on. Kimble trims his thick beard and shaves his face clean using the man's razor. He slicks his hair back and exits the room. As he passes through the hallway, where he will encounter the state trooper, Kimble appears surprisingly different from his disheveled "fugitive look" early in the film. He has found a doctor's smock, which he now wears, and has hung a stethoscope casually around his neck. In effect, he has transformed back into the dashing impostor we all know from Ford's portrayal of Han Solo in the original *Star Wars* trilogy.

Spotting the officer for the first time, Kimble quietly says, "Shit," and averts his gaze, a classic Imaginary tactic of simple hiding, which will not succeed if he persists in it.

The state trooper looks directly up from the fax at Kimble and addresses him in a casual tone, "Hey, doc, we're looking for a prisoner from that bus/train wreck a couple hours ago—might be hurt."

Kimble's reply is nerve-rackingly tentative, a borderline giveaway: "Uh, what does he look like?"

"Six one, one-eighty, brown eyes, brown hair, beard. Seen anyone like that around?"

"*Every time I look in the mirror, pal.* Except for the beard, of course." Kimble chuckles and turns to exit.

But just when Kimble appears to have gotten away with this all-too-real confession, the trooper ominously interrupts: "Doc!"

Kimble, hesitatingly: “Yeah?”

The trooper gestures that Kimble’s fly is unzipped.

Kimble zips up: “Thanks.”

The trooper turns and laughs to himself—*just another frazzled, absent-minded doctor*.

The success of this scene depends neither solely on the Symbolic-order double deceptive admission of guilt by Kimble, nor on the Imaginary disguise afforded by his absent beard, but rather on the combination of these two factors. The lack of a beard is precisely what makes Kimble look suspicious, since everyone knows that the first thing escaped convicts try to do is change their appearance. Yet, at the same time, the lack of beard is exactly what makes Kimble’s double deception possible, via the discourse that surrounds it. Kimble the doctor admits that he looks exactly like Kimble the escaped convict “except for the beard,” and by directly pointing out the exact detail that makes him most suspicious, he permits the officer to maintain his in-control attitude of experienced-cop-ness. For the trooper, the admission makes the exchange utterly normal, while for the viewer things are completely paradoxical: to any investigative outside observer, the disheveled doctor in the hallway cannot possibly be Kimble precisely because he *is* him. Moreover, we need to be clear that Kimble does not deliberately try to fail in his simulation, he just fails, with his inadvertently “unzipped” comportment serving as the basis for an exculpatory rapport. Kimble is more than a little Trumpian in this regard.

In the examples of rapport I have examined, the admission of actual truth enables a feeling of *simpatico*—an intersubjective link between two Symbolic beings. Yet it is also possible for such failures of representation to result in a more literal form of blind spot, for both individual subjects and social groups. In the section that follows, I argue that the co-presence of the Imaginary and the Symbolic in humans opens up the possibility not only of minor careless oversights, but of missing what is profoundly obvious, sometimes on a mass scale. Indeed, it is precisely when a precious, sought-after object is most diligently pursued in the Imaginary that it disappears entirely from the Symbolic. In such fruitless pursuits, the more obvious to our searching an object’s placement is—indeed the more squarely it appears right there in front of us—the less findable it becomes.

Missing the Obvious

According to Lacan, an ordinary rascal has just enough insight to hide his contraband in extraordinary places, “running the gamut from hidden desk drawers to removable tabletops, from the unstitched upholstery of chairs to their hollowed-out legs, and from the back side of the quick-silvering of mirrors to the thickness of book bindings.”¹⁴ The problem with such strategies is that one’s opponent on the side of the law need only investigate all the usual crafty hiding places in order to solve the case. The problem faced by the police in “The Purloined Letter” is that despite the fact that they have combed literally every square inch of the Minister’s apartment, and despite knowing with absolute certainty that the letter is somewhere in the apartment, their exhaustive searches have turned up nothing. Clearly, the issue is that the Prefect and his men have managed to look directly at the letter without seeing it. In more practical terms, Lacan asks, “What were [the police investigators] turning over with their fingers but something that *did not fit* the description they had been given of it?”¹⁵

As a name for this epistemological blindness, Lacan invokes the arcane term “nullibity,” which represents the state of being nowhere, although in the context of the story it might better be defined as the state of being *nowhere to be found*.¹⁶ Nullibity is a condition we experience regularly in daily life: looking for the scissors on the kitchen counter and knowing they are there, but being unable to find them. The problem, one senses, is that the scissor-seeker’s frustration derives from too quickly concluding that the scissors have been misplaced—*they are lost!* Consequently, they set out searching for an object that falls under the signifier “lost”—that is, an object hidden or obscured in some unexpected crevice or cubby—instead of an object that falls under the signifier “found,” one that is plain to see, right there in the middle of the counter. Interestingly, a piece of homespun pop psychology advises us that the problem can immediately be resolved if we simply speak out loud the name of the object, “scissors, scissors, scissors,” at which point we will immediately find them through a sort of Symbolic conjuring that snaps us out of our Imaginary stupor. It is as though the signifier needs to materialize in order for the object to do so.

Similar to this mystery of the nullibiquitous scissors is the investigation conducted by the Prefect of Police in “The Purloined Letter.” In the story, according to Lacan, the Prefect finds himself confronted with a nullibiety that for Dupin has always been quite the opposite: an easily findable object. The Prefect and his team of detectives search for the stolen letter on the order of the Imaginary, in which hidden objects are shrewdly concealed (i.e., in hollowed-out chair legs, behind mirrors, etc.), while never engaging on the order of the Symbolic, in which signifiers may be playfully substituted for their opposite and where objects can be hidden in plain sight. Quoting Lacan, the “imbecility” of the police “is of neither the individual nor the corporate variety; its source is subjective”:

It is the imbecility of the realist who does not pause to observe that nothing, however deep into the bowels of the world a hand may shove it, will ever be hidden there, since another hand can retrieve it, and that what is hidden is never but what is *not in its place* [manque a sa place], as a call slip says of a volume mislaid in a library. And even if the book were on an adjacent shelf or in the next slot, it would be hidden there, however visible it may seem there. For it can *literally* [a la lettre] be said that something is not in its place only of what can change places—that is, of the symbolic.¹⁷

Lacan moreover likens the Prefect’s complete inability to meet Dupin on his (Symbolic) level to a happy dog being stroked by his master, while noting that the problem with non-hidden lost items involves a reciprocity: “The fact that it is, as Dupin insinuates, because a problem is too simple, indeed too self-evident, that it may appear obscure, will never have any more impact on [the Prefect] than a somewhat vigorous rub of the ribcage.”¹⁸ Not only do the scissors disappear into a blind spot because we presume them to be lost, but the seeker is also *extra* predisposed to developing a blind spot when the scissors are most readily available to the eye.

The most striking recent example of an Imaginary-order blind spot, in which a whole range of characters repeatedly miss the obvious, comes in season three of *Twin Peaks* (Mark Frost and David Lynch, 2017). Following a dark and surreal journey from the Black Lodge, FBI Special

Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) materializes via an electrical wall outlet in a foreclosed suburban Las Vegas home. His arrival corresponds with the disappearance from the room of philandering insurance salesman Dougie Jones (also MacLachlan), who returns to the Black Lodge and eventually disintegrates. On a first viewing, these events are obscure and difficult to parse, but one thing is clear: Cooper has replaced Dougie Jones, and the new “Dougie” appears virtually identical to the old one, with the exception of Cooper’s trademark black suit and tie having reappeared, along with his slicked-over FBI haircut.

At the same time, a profound behavioral change undercuts all our nostalgia for Cooper’s return. Different from the personality of Dougie—whom we ascertain through only a few lines of dialogue and a couple of actions to be an “average Las Vegas dude”—and far removed from the iconically upbeat yet by-the-books demeanor of the Agent Cooper we know from Lynch’s previous *Twin Peaks* offerings, Cooper’s spontaneous rebirth transforms his personality into that of a toddler on the cusp of exiting the Lacanian mirror stage. I mean this literally. Impossible to predict in the run-up to the series debut, and very strange to behold, we find our “main man” Cooper walking through the story world just exactly as would a child who is beginning to acquire language.

Everything we see Cooper do in these early episodes, he seems to be doing for the first time: eating, drinking, urinating, walking up stairs, navigating a revolving door. Through a series of early scenes, Cooper is only able to follow rudimentary directions (for instance, indexical pointing gestures), and his language acquisition develops ever-so-slowly by way of an exact mirroring of the words he hears. Someone says “coffee”; Cooper replies “coffee.” Someone says “call for help”; Cooper replies “call for help.” This idiotic call-and-response transpires over the course of approximately forty scenes, spread out over thirteen episodes—far longer than we would expect anyone, including David Lynch, to sustain such a bizarre premise.

The fact that Cooper exists in a perpetual state of Imaginary mirror relations crystallizes in the office of a casino supervisor, Mr. Burns (Brett Gelman), whose job is to deliver to Cooper his winnings from an impossible lucky streak on the slot machines. When Burns pushes a large bank bag full of cash across the desk, pre-Symbolic Cooper, not knowing or caring what such bags typically contain or signify, pushes it right back.

They draw closer to one another, face to face, in a kind of showdown stance that clearly resembles a mirror. Such behavior is far from isolated or anomalous in the series. In other scenes, Cooper plays a clunky “peek-a-boo” game of occultation with the elevator doors at Dougie’s office building and later with a “clapper” light switch in the bedroom of Dougie’s son—both activities approximating the behaviors of a mirror-stage child. Moreover, emblematic of Cooper’s state of regression is a motif wherein various characters pat their hand on a bed or the seat of a chair, indicating that Cooper should sit down, and Cooper responds by patting the chair with his own hand in imitation, rather than sitting.

However, the most pronounced idiocy of these sequences belongs not to Agent Cooper, who appears to have magically regressed to a prior psychological stage, but to those around him, who to various degrees either fail to remark at Dougie’s strange behavior and radical change in personality, or are all too ready to explain it away. Not a single person in Las Vegas seems anywhere near concluding that the man-child they are interacting with is someone other than Dougie Jones. No one moves to call an ambulance or asks any probing questions. Indeed, we could go further and say that the infantile comportment of Cooper is so bizarre that *no matter how bizarrely* Dougie acted is his previous life—no matter how depressed, erratic, or drug-addled his backstory—the inert, robotic, utterly desire-free behavior Cooper presently manifests could not possibly square with Dougie’s past, normal way of being. Yet no one seems particularly concerned, with various colleagues rationalizing his behavior as “clowning around” or “one of his episodes,” or bemusedly noting the fact that he is an “interesting fellow.” In some ways, Dougie’s lack of affect—his status as pure cipher—positions him as a kind of walking Kuleshov effect, with various characters interpreting his facial and bodily non-reactions based on the immediate context, and then proceeding to treat him in ways that accord with what they deduce.¹⁹

All the while, as if to underscore his status as a man-sized toddler, the juvenile name “Dougie”—a hypocorism uncommon for an American adult—is repeated excessively by his family and colleagues in lieu of common pronouns, as if to underscore at every juncture the fact that no one is seeing things correctly. This nominative repetition may be especially annoying for longtime fans of *Twin Peaks*, who long for the return of “good old” Cooper in his adult form, but instead get *Dougie*,

Dougie, and more Dougie. Yet there is a point to this repetition, for the proper name “Dougie” is the crucial Symbolic signifier that anchors the Imaginary idiocy of the other characters’ misrecognition. Because the man-toddler Cooper looks like the-one-named-Dougie, and because everyone calls him by the name Dougie, he simply *is Dougie*. Any departure from his expected personality is strictly secondary to the signifying chain that extends out of Dougie’s past to meet up with his nomination as a familiar.

At issue here again is Lacan’s concept of nullibiety: the idea that we cannot discern what is right in front of us, precisely because it is right in front of us. Whereas a subtle change in inflection, for instance, might inadvertently undermine a proclamation of love or create undue paranoia for an applicant during a job interview, more drastic signifiers such as real-world screams and gunshots are often either ignored or thought to be something else (e.g., bystanders near the scene of a recent crime often remark that they thought they were hearing fireworks). This conception of nullibiety is borne out in *Twin Peaks* as it becomes increasingly clear that the closer various characters are in their personal relations to “Dougie Jones,” the less likely they are to remark that he is any different. For instance, Dougie’s wife Janey-E (Naomi Watts) and his son Sonny Jim (Pierce Gagnon) seem virtually unaware that Dougie has changed, or if they are aware, their actions suggest an intense level of denial.

A notable pop-cultural precursor to the Imaginary misrecognition of mirror-stage Cooper as Dougie is the longstanding trope in which the identity of Superman (and other later superheroes) can’t be deduced because of tiny, superficial changes in his costuming and comportment. Clark Kent wears glasses, acts awkward and nerdy, works at a newspaper, and so forth; because of this, no one at the *Daily Planet* recognizes the very obvious presence of Superman, right in front of their eyes, despite the fact that they all are actively seeking to discover Superman’s identity. This trope is so well established that the 2015 television series *Supergirl* actively jokes about it. When Kara Danvers (Melissa Benoist) worries aloud that her boss at CatCo Worldwide Media, Cat Grant (Calista Flockhart), would recognize that she is Supergirl “in like one second,” Kara’s friend and colleague James Olson asks, “Why don’t you think people recognize [Superman] as Clark Kent?”

Kara retorts, “Reading glasses and a good slouch?” echoing decades of fan skepticism about the trope.

James’s response to Kara’s sarcasm is serious and theoretical: “No. He’s able to hide because the world can’t believe that there’s really a hero in their midst.”

This assessment highlights a crucial aspect of what makes the image of Dougie Jones persist in an unquestioned way, despite his absence. Cooper can pass as Dougie, and Superman can disguise himself as Clark Kent, precisely because the true state of affairs represents an obvious impossibility. Far from subtle, the truth is paradoxically too outrageous to acknowledge. The reason that Dougie Jones’s family cannot see him for what he is, or respond appropriately to his drastic change, parallels the *modus operandi* of Poe’s Prefect of Police. The Prefect cannot find the letter because he seeks what is hidden, even if it is not in fact hidden. Conversely, Dougie’s family and work colleagues do not notice he has changed precisely because his change has been *too radical*. Far from a subtle attempt at disguise, a minor Freudian parapraxis, or a Las Vegas card player’s nervous “tell”—all of which would generate immediate suspicion—Dougie is *nothing at all like himself*. Dougie is a new man, changed in literally every way save for his facial features, and for this reason no one sees any problem. To overlook the obvious in this way has nothing to do with the ridiculousness of believing that doppelgangers or superheroes exist in reality, but instead with our Symbolic misrecognition of Imaginary change, a blindness that idiotically disregards any possibility of contradiction between one’s name and the place it holds in the world.

In the following, my final section, I examine representations that are dyadic in a different sense, not masking an obtrusive contradiction, but instead calling attention to themselves via an excessive, one-to-one literality.

On the Nose

Virtually all “observational” stand-up comedy, of which Jerry Seinfeld is the undisputed master, revolves around two basic strategies. The first approach is for the comic to play the role of the Dupin-like Symbolic sophisticate, elucidating from on-high the idiotic Imaginary practices

of which we are all guilty. Consider the following as a typical Seinfeld bit: “Did you ever notice, when you are sitting at a red light, that when the person in front of you pulls up a couple of inches, you are compelled to move up too? Do we really think we are making progress toward our destination? ‘Whew, I thought we would be late, but now that I am nine inches closer, I can stop for coffee and a danish!’”²⁰ The second strategy in stand-up comedy represents a sort of inversion of the first approach, whereby the comic points out the strangely nuanced, culturally inscribed practices of the Symbolic from the point of view of an Imaginary dullard, inviting his audience to play dumb regarding their own daily habits and routines. Again, Jerry Seinfeld: “How come you have to pay someone to rotate your tires? Isn’t that the basic idea behind the wheel? Don’t they rotate on their own?”²¹ In both of these examples, the humor is not inherent in the situation described, but lies in the differential relation between the two orders of subjectivity: either the Symbolic cannot abide the dyadic idiocy of the Imaginary, or the Imaginary cannot discern the arbitrary and at times playful linguistic nuances of the Symbolic. It should thus not surprise us when investigations into forms of Imaginary idiocy and Symbolic double deception take on a Seinfeldian tone.

Were a theorist of the Lacanian Imaginary to take up a career in stand-up comedy, she might be prone to observe that unclear or imbalanced dyadic relations—relations in which two counterpart halves do not correspond in a tidy way—are a source of great trouble for humans. Consider the awkward situation in which one phones in a pizza order for two:

CALLER: “Hi, I’d like to order a large pizza, half pepperoni, half plain.”

PIZZA SHOP EMPLOYEE: “So, half pepperoni, half cheese?”

<pause>

CALLER: “Uh, yeah?”

Obviously, the caller’s initial request is not for a literally “plain” side of the pizza, that is, with no sauce or cheese, yet the pizza shop employee responds as if that is what is being asked for. There are all manner of obstacles to eliminating this awkward beat. For one, there is no tidily

parallel way to designate that in addition to the pepperoni side of the pizza, one wants a side with nothing on it. The suggestion of the worker at the pizza shop—“half cheese”—is absurdly obvious and no better than what the caller has already enunciated. *Well, yes, of course I want cheese on both sides; by definition, pizza is topped with cheese!* Conversely, it is not possible to order “a large plain pizza with pepperoni on half,” because the addition of pepperoni logically contradicts the existing request for “plain.”

The only correct (i.e., Lacanian) way to order such a pizza makes a mockery of pizza-ordering conventions altogether: “I’d like to order a large pepperoni pizza, lacking pepperoni on half.” Although the amount of collective social anxiety that surges up on any given day around such mundane tasks is frankly disturbing, my point is not to outline a better approach to pizza-ordering, but rather to highlight the deep embarrassment one experiences when encountering deadlocks between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, situations in which there is no clear or standard discursive convention through which to articulate the lopsided, out-of-balance, would-be-dyadic object that is so easily envisioned.

One suspects that Americans’ inability to use the word “you” in reference to a plurality of people—opting instead for *y’all* (“you all” in the South), *youse* (“you-s” in Chicago), *yinz* (“you ones” in Pittsburgh), or *you guys* (“you group of patrons” in any chain restaurant)—represents a similar form of idiotic embarrassment, not because such formations break a grammatical rule, but because they adhere too logically to the mirror logic of the Imaginary, in which reflections are necessarily one-to-one, tidily parallel. Indeed, there seems to be no end to the lengths to which speakers will go to avoid saying the word “you” as a plural. If “y’all” doesn’t seem to encompass the entire group, try “all y’all.” If “yinz” isn’t sufficiently emphatically plural, say “yinz guys” or “all yinz guys.” Why, in Lacanian theoretical terms, are so many speakers of American English reluctant to deploy the plural “you”?

One answer could be that the word “you” in its singular form is the most important signifier of the Imaginary dyad—the signifier that *evens things out* in a mirror-like way—and as such it should not be made to designate two oppositional concepts, singularity and plurality. Yet, embarrassingly, “you” plural forces speakers to publicly avow exactly such

an impossible conflation. Idiotic Americans find themselves flummoxed, faced with a kind of linguistic-existential anguish any time it becomes necessary to utter the word “you” plural, as though some great cosmic imbalance were about to erupt. In effect, “y’all” and other second-person pluralized pronouns represent a neurotic tic on massive regional scales: an acknowledgment that for a speaking subject to fail to explicitly designate the plurality of others constitutes an assent that any individual other is free to disregard the subject’s own specificity. “Y’all” brings the uncomfortable, untidy one-to-one-or-more relation of the plural “you” happily back into square as dyadic. Beyond an effort at clarity, “y’all” is an embarrassed offering to the other that the subject hopes will be repaid in a show of respect for her own dyadic monism. This, our Lacanian observational comic might say, *is the deal with* the plural “you.”

At the same time, in everyday life one occasionally encounters modes of discourse, and forms of representation, in which a kind of auto-observational “outed-ness” precludes the need for any Seinfeldian voice to point it out. In such situations, the Symbolic is not out of square with the Imaginary, but exceedingly optimized to it, with the two orders themselves forming a dyad. Far from embarrassingly lopsided, such representations are judged to be “too on-the-nose”—comfortable and expected to such a degree that perfect correspondence becomes objectionable, a sticking point. When a Hollywood producer remarks that a film’s title or choice of music is “too on-the-nose,” the problem is one of optimal overlap, of having hit the mark in such a way that it fails to appear natural, or calls attention to its own ideality. In *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016), modeling agent Roberta Hoffman (Christina Hendricks) asks would-be model Jesse (Elle Fanning) to forge her parents’ signature on a consent form and says to her, “When someone asks, I want you to say you are nineteen. Always nineteen. Eighteen is too on-the-nose.” Eighteen is typically the age of consent in the US, so to falsely claim eligibility by representing oneself as no more and no less than eighteen *names the goal* in a manner that is too precise, and thus seems like a juvenile ploy.

The phrase “on-the-nose” is of course not always a pejorative. In real-life interactions—for instance, in a numerical guessing game or at an archery range—one can make an observation about a statement or

physical action that is on-the-nose in a laudatory sense, meaning “how uncannily accurate!” or “you got it exactly!” However, when someone is evaluating a fictional narrative, or any deliberate work of representation, the phrase “on-the-nose” always invokes the judgmental Other of the Symbolic order, anticipating a wider audience that will notice the artifice, ultimately displeased that they are being “played” in such a rudimentary, straightforward manner.

It could be argued that the musical choices in *An American Werewolf in London* (John Landis, 1981) are on-the-nose inasmuch as we all know that werewolves only appear during a full moon, and the soundtrack features classic popular songs such as “Moondance,” “Bad Moon Rising,” and “Blue Moon.” These choices are too perfect, too literal, *too clever by half*—a phrase whose origins are obscure, but which generally means “trying too hard to be clever.” In short, the songs too obviously or directly answer the question as to which popular songs a werewolf-centered horror film might include. The resulting list of song choices sounds like a compendium of someone’s bad first ideas: “What song should we use here?” “Hey, I know: ‘Moondance’ by Van Morrison! Get it? *Moon dance*?”²²

On-the-nose Imaginary idiocy need not be limited to choices of words; it can also appear in visual designs and arrangements. Starring goofball comic actor Don Knotts as hapless, milquetoast typesetter Luther Heggs, the 1966 horror-comedy *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken* (Alan Rafkin) chooses the perfect car for its emasculated protagonist. In the film’s opening scene, Luther drives past an old mansion and hears a neighbor screaming that someone has been murdered. He makes a comically clumsy U-turn and pulls up to the crime scene in his silver 1958 Ford Edsel. In the finely tuned semiotics of automobile design, the Edsel is a famously appalling specimen. It is that rarest of objects: a truly exceptional, mass-produced American car. Arguably, the Edsel both dramatically flaunts and underscores by exception Horkheimer and Adorno’s observation that American automobiles, like all “mechanically differentiated products,” are “ultimately all the same,” and that any perceived difference “between the models of Chrysler and General Motors is fundamentally illusory.”²³

It would not be overstating the case to say that the Edsel, a brash at-

tempt to defy the self-sameness of Detroit's mid-century output, is among the most on-the-nose product designs in the history of mass production. Manufactured by Ford from 1958 to 1960, the Edsel is named after Edsel B. Ford, the son of the company's founder, Henry Ford. From a marketing standpoint, it is an unfortunate sounding name, to be sure. But far more problematic is the design of the car's grill, the center of which resembles puckering fish-lips to children and something more eschatological to adults: a gaping vagina. In the 1950s, cars were designed to exude sexuality in their feminine curves and phallic points of excess. All of this sublimation worked well for consumers and could be repressed or denied up to a certain threshold, but the Edsel's vaginal grill embodies an Imaginary short-circuit. Forgoing the necessary stylistic sublimation, the car's designers went straight to the point, showing the female sex organ too directly. The fact that the Edsel's chrome vagina appears between the vehicle's headlights, at the position where a "nose" would normally appear, only underscores its unnervingly on-the-nose literality. Rather than subtly insinuating sex by way of a visual double entendre, the Edsel foregrounds reproductive biology per se, unveiling it for all to see.

The concept of Imaginary on-the-nose-ness can be extended to representations in which symbolism, in a fairly standard literary-interpretive sense, becomes too obvious or transparent, resulting in an instantly snarky, desublimating judgment on the part of its beholder. In the US especially, pickup trucks with large off-road tires, raised high on suspension lift kits, are a common sight. Equally common is the retort to such masculine display, often voiced by a woman: "Dude, sorry about your penis!" This joke, a late residue of the popularization of Freudian theory in American culture, equates insecurity about appearing small or lacking with a compensatory cultural practice: oversized, jacked-up work vehicles. The same joke could be levied against would-be sports car enthusiasts. A front-wheel-drive car with a sleek spoiler perched above the rear bumper appears conspicuously compensatory. Rather than being fast, the car is modified to look fast. Even if such a vehicle could attain speeds where downforce matters, the spoiler is not positioned atop the drive wheels and thus has no effect. Yet, to be clear, automobiles have virtually always been sold to consumers on the basis of such "sporty" connotative adornments, which redress actual drivers' boring daily commutes, and

insecurities about male potency, in a manner that is too on-the-nose and purely Imaginary.

The point here is not that the woman who says “sorry about your penis!” is redundant, but rather that her assessment of the jacked-up truck’s symbolism—of what it represents in penile terms—is a typical Symbolic judgment about a transparently dyadic Imaginary practice. A more astute analyst might retort that the driver of a jacked-up truck or sports car should instead be “sorry about [their] default subscription to the idiocy of the Imaginary.” In place of the out-of-kilter, arbitrary, and even nonsensical playfulness of the Symbolic, in which overt displays of masculine largess may be disavowed through attenuation (i.e., the reverse cliché, in which you know a man is formidable when he walks through the neighborhood with his toy poodle), the truck-driving dude derives a feeling of superiority from piloting a pickup that literally rides higher. The joke-worthiness of such a display is self-evident to fellow motorists: he has pathetically traded Symbolic stature, in which one’s *refusal* to “act big” connotes power and mastery, for an idiotically Imaginary elevation, in which his jacked-up truck is all too literally erected above all others on the road. Such instances of on-the-nose male display fail to impress not because of a lack of technical prowess, but because they are too obvious, too direct in their measuring of superiority in inches of rise. There is no subtlety and no room for interpretation; the phallus is not veiled (as Lacan says it must be), but out there for all to see. The problem, of course, is that once unveiled as a measurable object, no amount of rise can match the imagined potency of a phallus that remains implied but as yet unseen.

A similarly masculinist, one-to-one literalism pervades the notorious 2003 cult film *The Room* (Tommy Wiseau), perhaps the greatest example of a “so bad it’s good” cult object ever produced, and a film that is nothing short of an apotheosis of Imaginary idiocy in cinema. Director Wiseau’s self-funded vanity project is a film that earnestly believes that more is better and less is worse, that masculinity is masculine and femininity is feminine, that good is good and evil is evil, that beginnings are beginnings and endings are endings, and that all ideals, motives, and objects must appear unambiguously and directly as what they are. *The Room* is a kind of alien world under glass, an answer to the question,

what if humans, despite their capacity for speech, nonetheless conducted their lives solely on the order of the Imaginary?

One relatively subtle symptom of Wiseau's hyper-dyadic approach to cinema is that whenever a character appears in a scene they are greeted as a new and surprising element in a fully realized Imaginary picture: "Oh hi, Mark!" or "Oh hi, Denny!" Similarly, "goodbyes" are customary upon a character's exit and are usually delivered by protagonist Johnny (Tommy Wiseau), who serves as a kind of herald or emcee for the story-world, helpfully acknowledging all the comings to and goings from the Imaginary fishbowl of his San Francisco townhouse. Moreover, with the exception of Johnny's fiancé, Lisa (Juliette Danielle), and his best friend, Mark (Greg Sestero)—who carry on an affair behind Johnny's back, and thus represent a kind of cynical noir foil to Johnny's perennial optimism—everyone in the film behaves as if satisfaction is fully satisfying, and as if desire is not a response to lack. A good example of this too-direct, Imaginary linearity are Lisa's two romantically involved friends, Michelle (Robyn Paris) and Mike (Mike Holmes). The couple shows up to Johnny's apartment apparently to "do homework," find it vacant, and immediately begin kissing and groping, and eating chocolate bonbons out of each other's mouths, not because this is "naughty" or prohibited in some vaguely exhibitionistic way, but instead because desire for them is entirely unproblematic and straightforward. They are lovers and must appear in Wiseau's narrative as such: visibly loving, all the time. All of this one-to-one obviousness is at once the precise source of the film's strong camp appeal and a constant reminder that this is not primarily how desire works for Symbolic humans.

The most egregious factor in *The Room's* exclusively dyadic approach to representation are the film's three lengthy sex scenes. For whole long sequences, we see the bodies of Johnny and Lisa writhing passionately on a fluffy white bed amid diaphanous curtains. This is an exemplary case of Imaginary idiocy in the sense that Wiseau wholeheartedly believes in the Imaginary dyad *more = better*, and therefore *more on-screen sex = increased sexiness*. There seems to be no end to the gratification he takes in showing himself nude on screen, yet the audience's reaction is quite the opposite: whether viewing the film ironically or not, we cannot wait for these extended sex scenes to be over. Displacing the intermittence

proper to the erotic with an unrelenting display of thrusting buttocks, Tommy Wiseau “delivers the goods” and thus shows us what sexiness looks like in the Imaginary. What he fails to understand is the prohibition implicit in Symbolic enjoyment. Wiseau need not have read Lacan to realize that overindulgence risks turning the object of desire into its opposite—the old cliché that it is possible to have “too much of a good thing.” Indeed, we might here venture the hypothesis that the Imaginary, if left unchecked by Symbolic Law, always delivers too much of a good thing. Why? Because whereas it is the function of the Symbolic to partialize and withhold, it is the function of the Imaginary to *match*—fully, obviously, and coherently, just as in a mirror reflection.

Such idiocy, however, is never as banal in its real-world effects as examples from movies and popular culture make it seem. Clearly, humans’ susceptibility to Imaginary deception and display can have dire material consequences for individuals, society, and the environment. Perhaps the most horrifying of all dyadic Imaginary displays took place in February 2015, when Oklahoma Congressman Jim Inhofe brought a snowball onto the floor of the US Senate and tossed it to the sitting Senate President as proof that global warming was a hoax. Paired with this, behind Inhofe on an easel, stood a giant enlarged photograph of his daughter’s family standing next to an igloo they had built after a record snowstorm—more anecdotal evidence to contradict the “eggheads” who keep telling the American public that the earth is warming.²⁴ The point here has less to do with Inhofe’s particular props—which embody a homespun, commonsensical quality designed to appeal to his base—but with the overtly dyadic Imaginary idiocy of climate change denial in general. *Global warming cannot be real*, the idiots proclaim, *because I am experiencing coldness right now*. Yet there is a degree of idiocy, too, on the part of scientists who persist in using the term “global warming,” which confers an Imaginary unity on a crisis whose effects are neither “global” (in the sense of being uniform or consistent), nor universally a problem of “warming” (in the sense that climate change is causing weather to be more severe in various ways, including extreme cold stretches and excessive precipitation, including snow).

Similarly, can there be any doubt that so-called anti-vaxxers’ resistance to inoculating infants has less to do with any purported scientific

evidence linking vaccines to autism than it does with being unable to shake the following idiotically on-the-nose parallel: injecting children with a weakened live virus (such as the MMRV) *must be harmful* to children over time, because inoculation *appears harmful* at its face. By this, I mean nothing more than parents quite naturally wince upon seeing a virus-filled needle pierce the skin of their helpless, adorable little baby. The problem, of course, is that “looks harmful” and “is harmful” do not necessarily correlate. To put one’s faith in such tidy, dyadic parallels is to risk riding the Imaginary toward the slippery slope of the conspiracy theorist—the one who believes, like Poe’s Prefect of Police, that if the cause of a phenomenon is missing or unclear, someone must have deliberately hidden or obfuscated it.

Conclusion (BS)

In *Seminar XIX*, as part of a discussion of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Lacan posits a connection between authenticity and what he terms *connerie*. “[M]y difficulty,” he states, “is that my matheme, given the field of discourse that I have to set up . . . , is always close to *connerie*.”²⁵ The French slang word *connerie*, however, presents a problem for translators, whose own linguistic idioms are no less obscure. Working in Ireland, Cormac Gallagher translates *connerie* as “feckology,” an uncommon term that evokes rubbish discourse raised to the status of a science, or nonsense being taken very seriously.²⁶ The French noun *con* of course means “cunt,” but as in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, the word lacks the taboo offensiveness this term carries in American English. By reducing the obscenity of “fuck” to the minced oath “feck,” Gallagher seeks to approximate what is crucial in *connerie*: a sense of commonplace utility, rather than the exceptionality of a cursing expletive. In other words, regardless of age or background, *everyone* engages in a little *connerie* (or “feckology”) now and then. In British English, a good translation of *connerie* is “bollocks,” a multipurpose slang term that most often conveys a sense of nonsense or uselessness, despite its eschatological literal meaning: testicles or “balls.” Here again, we get a sense of the mildly improper, but not the shocking—a reduced, mildly disruptive, even family-friendly, playful condemnation, rather than overt verbal abuse. Both of these analogous

terms for *connerie*—feckology and bollocks—convey a sense of *obscenity made friendly*, or conversely, *friendliness achieved by way of obscenity*.

In American English, *connerie* is perhaps best translated as “bullshit,” but in a specific, modulated sense. Depending on context, *connerie* can imply both lighthearted inconsequential banter (as in “we were just standing around bullshitting”) and a somewhat more aggressive, accusatory jab (as in “I’ve had enough of his bullshit”). *Connerie* can likewise be strategized, as is made clear in a saying attributed to W. C. Fields: “If you can’t dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bullshit.” When a university student composes a bunch of meaningless nonsense in order to meet a required word count in their English paper, that’s *connerie* and also “bullshitting your way to a passing grade.” At the same time, because the French are not puritanical about their use of expletives—they do not generally consider them “bad words” or “swears”—a more precise translation of *connerie* into American slang would be the abbreviations “BS” or “bull,” both of which are toned-down ways of saying “bullshit,” while retaining W. C. Fields’s sense of free-flowing, baffling nonsense that at once engages and confuses one’s audience. To be clear, however, the impulse to “dazzle them with brilliance” is an Imaginary approach, whereas to “baffle them” with bullshit, bollocks, *connerie*, and so on, entails a Symbolic-order double deception.

Interestingly, given what I have said above regarding Trumpism, Lacan’s excursus on *connerie* is not limited to his mathemes, but soon develops into a discussion of political BS (and, for the sake of argument, I will henceforth translate Lacan’s word “*connerie*” as “BS”): “It is not just that I admire BS; I would say more [that] I prostrate myself before it. You, for your part, you do not prostrate yourselves. You are conscious and organized electors. You do not vote for sods. That is where you miss out. A happy political system ought to allow BS to have its place. And, moreover, things only work well when BS dominates.”²⁷ Although some question remains as to whether a “happy political system” is an ideal worth pursuing, Lacan concludes his discussion of *connerie* by pointedly linking the concept to authenticity: “[R]eally—how can I put it—BS acts as a proof of authenticity. What dominates, is the authenticity, as I might put it, of BS. . . . There is all the same nothing more authentic than BS.”²⁸ If the very existence of the term *connerie*—along with its cognates in other

languages such as “BS”—works to conflate obscenity and friendliness, it does so via an admission of failure on the order of the Symbolic. Countering the overzealous perfect binarism of the Imaginary, *connerie* is a discourse of messily mismatched, yet amiable banter that freely admits that it is nonsense and is acknowledged by all parties as such, and as necessary. Although it is a commonplace in the US to express a desire to efficaciously “cut through the BS,” BS is precisely that which “cuts through” Imaginary idiocy in the form of an authentic, unprepared, off-the-cuff discourse.

Throughout this essay, I have paired the word “idiocy” with the Imaginary order, but have resisted attaching an equivalently pithy term to the Symbolic. The phrase “double deception” comes close, but I will end by making explicit that what bests Imaginary idiocy, and what demarcates it as both a different and lesser mode of representation and discursive exchange, is *Symbolic BS*. I will leave the reader to decide whether this term encapsulates all of the many examples of double deception I have outlined in this field guide.

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NOTES

1. Jacques Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 43–44.

2. Adrienne LaFrance, “Michelle Obama: ‘Going High’ Means Remaining Outraged,” *Atlantic*, October 14, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/10/michelle-obama-goes-high/504203/>.

3. Eric Anthamatten, “Trump and the True Meaning of ‘Idiot,’” *New York Times*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/12/opinion/trump-and-the-true-meaning-of-idiot.html>.

4. The term “double deception” is a commonsensical way to describe the paradox of Symbolic order deception, and appears to have been first used by Slavoj Žižek in

his book *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 73.

5. Matt Viser, “Donald Trump Relies on a Simple Phrase: ‘Believe Me,’” *Boston Globe*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2016/05/24/donald-trump-relies-heavily-simple-phrase-believe/opyVI36H7oAOHgXzuP1P5H/story.html>.

6. Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire IX: L’Identification*, November 15, 1961, http://gaogoa.free.fr/Seminaires_HTML/09-ID/ID15111961.htm; my translation.

7. Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” in *Écrits*, 683.

8. Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter,” in *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 137.

9. Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 8–9.

10. Poe, “Purloined Letter,” 136; italics mine.

11. Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 8.

12. Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 11.

13. Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 14.

14. Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 15.

15. Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 18.

16. Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 16.

17. Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 17.

18. Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” 15.

19. In the now mythic Kuleshov film-editing experiment, a selection of images—for instance, a plate of food, a child in a coffin, and an attractive woman reclining on a divan—were juxtaposed with a neutral image of a man’s face. Depending on the image previously seen, the viewer’s sense of the man’s emotional state would noticeably change. For a discussion of the various accounts of the Kuleshov experiment, see Amy Sargeant, *Vsevolod Pudovkin: Classic Films of the Soviet Avant-garde* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 6–11.

20. Judy Brown, *Jokes Over Easy: 1,386 Delicious Jokes from the Best Comedians* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006), 73.

21. Brown, *Jokes Over Easy*, 35.

22. I am willing to consider the possibility that *American Werewolf’s* lunar-themed song choices were chosen stupidly on purpose, as a kind of intentional camp, but even if so, such a decision depends wholly on their Imaginary on-the-nose-ness being judged from a place in the Symbolic, as it always is.

23. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 97.

24. Phillip Bump, “Jim Inhofe’s Snowball Has Disproven Climate Change Once and For All,” *Washington Post*, February 26, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

/news/the-fix/wp/2015/02/26/jim-inhofes-snowball-has-disproven-climate-change-once-and-for-all/?utm_term=.3c09670fc6fa.

25. Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XIX: Ou pire*, December 15, 1971, http://gaogoa.free.fr/Seminaires_HTML/19-OP/OP15121971.htm; my translation.

26. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XIX*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (London: Karnac Books, 2003), II 3–4.

27. Lacan, *Book XIX*, II 4.

28. Lacan, *Book XIX*, II 6.