Of Corpse

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The taboo against contamination from a dead body is one of the most profound of all socio-cultural inhibitions. I often find myself quite uncomfortable at funerals, knowing that contained within that box at the front of the chapel or synagogue lies what once was a living, breathing, or possibly even joking human being. Beyond the element of grief, of having lost a loved one, there is something psychologically disturbing about the presence of a corpse: it is a reminder that we ourselves are mortal, and that we, too, one day, shall be lying in a similar box (see Freud 1950, 51–63; Harlow 1997; Small 1997).

Because of the profundity of that taboo, that almost universal fear of the dead, it is not surprising that popular films often draw upon the discomfort of being near a dead body for narrative inspiration. What is obvious to folklorists, who are used to working with traditional and often orally transmitted narratives, is that these movies, while presenting themselves as “original” texts, are sometimes based directly on, or even influenced by (whether consciously or unconsciously), traditional cultural beliefs. Many of these beliefs have been codified and narratively contextualized within traditional folktales. Stith Thompson, with Antti Aarne in The Types of the Folktale, as well as in his own Motif Index of Folk Literature, has identified enough occurrences of these beliefs within traditional narratives that he labeled them with both tale type and motif numbers.

A brief survey of the index volume of Thompson’s Motif Index under the keyword “Corpse” reveals many motifs that would be familiar to any fan of horror cinema. For example, Thompson’s motif G377, “Monster made from parts of corpse,” is, of course, the Frankenstein story, although Mary Shelley’s early nineteenth century novel is but one variation on that motif. Yet there are even more arcane examples that would be noticed only by those fans of “hardcore” and “splatter” movies, horror films notorious,
not for explicit sexuality as implied by the term “hardcore,” but by the
degree of gore they contain. A case in point is George Romero’s zombie
trilogy: Night of the Living Dead (1968), Dawn of the Dead (1978), and Day of
the Dead (1985), wherein the dead are reanimated (although no direct
cause is ever specified) with a taste for living human flesh; this can be
found in Thompson’s Motif Index as E422, “the living dead” (Thompson
1955–58, II: 445). Even more potentially obscure for researchers who are
not interested in horror cinema, particularly the kind of extreme “splat-
ter” movies I am discussing at the moment, is the motif E121.6.1, which
Thompson identifies as “Resuscitation by demon entering corpse”
(1955–58, II: 415). This is a plot familiar to any fan of Sam Raimi’s “Evil
Dead” trilogy: The Evil Dead (1982), The Evil Dead II (1987), and Army of
can be read as a satirical commentary on American consumerism,5 the
film has its feet firmly planted in the horror genre. Raimi’s trilogy, on the
other hand, with one foot in the kind of extreme horror that Romero
defined, recontextualizes the gore into the genre of slapstick comedy—
imagine Romero directing the Three Stooges.

However, before I discuss the uses of corpses in comic narratives—
both filmic and traditional—notice that many of the motifs which
Thompson identifies as “corpocentric” fall into three main categories:
there are ogre motifs (category G), motifs pertaining to “the dead” (cate-
gory E), and deception motifs (category K). Although I shall discuss this
last category in detail, it is worth noting the distinction that Thompson
makes between categories G and E, between ogres and “the dead.” By
“the dead,” Thompson means ghosts, spirits, and demons. The Romero
zombie films briefly outlined above are all category G motifs; that is,
when the dead are resurrected and walking about they are within the
role of the traditional ogre. The demon invasion motifs, where the dead
are resurrected due to evil spirits, including the yet-to-be-mentioned
E251.3.1 (Vampires eat [corpses’])” motif, are category E motifs, that is,
they fall within the role of the traditional ghost (Thompson 1955–58, II:
425). This distinction between ghosts and ogres, in traditional narrative
and belief, is a distinction between terrestrial (ogres/zombies) and aero-
ial (ghosts/vampires/evil spirits/demons) monsters. This distinction
needs further exploration, particularly as it pertains to contemporary
horror cinema.

The motif category I am discussing here is Thompson’s category K,
“Deceptions.” Within the category K motifs is one central motif pertaining
to uses of dead bodies: K2151, “The corpse handed around,” also known as “The Thrice-killed Corpse”. Thompson summarily describes this motif as follows: “Dupes are accused of murder when the corpse is left with them. The trickster is paid to keep silent” (Thompson 1955–58, III: 480). Thompson goes on to note that this motif is primarily found in two closely related tale types: 1536C, “The Murdered Lover,” and 1537, “The Corpse Killed Five Times” (Aarne 1981, 442), both of which are categorized by Aarne and Thompson as “Jokes and Anecdotes,” in part explaining why these two tale types feature little more than the single motifs noted above. D. L. Ashliman expands on these tales types in A Guide to Folktales in the English Language (1987), and identifies further sub-tale types within this area.

Ashliman identifies tale type 1536, “Disposing of a Corpse,” with the oft-cited contemporary legends “The Runaway Grandmother” and “The Dead Cat in the Package” (1987, 263–264). In both of these legends, the problem of disposing of a corpse (whether pet or parent) is eliminated through the inadvertent theft of the corpse, thereby alleviating the protagonists of the responsibility of disposing of the corpse themselves. Brunvand, citing Alan Dundes, identifies this legend as emerging out of the youth-centered society we inhabit, with its rejection of the aged, and its desire for inherited money and wealth (1981, 119). This links the modern legend back to “The Woman in the Chest” narrative, which I wish to focus on for a moment. Kurt Ranke’s Folktales of Germany tells the story thus:

A priest wanted to spy on the schoolmaster, whom he suspected of thievery. He put his mother in a chest, then took it to the teacher for safekeeping. The teacher discovered the spy and killed her, making it look like she had choked on a piece of bread. When the priest found his dead mother, he was afraid he would be accused of killing her, and he paid the teacher to help him prop her body at the top of a stairway in a tavern. A waitress accidentally knocked her down the stairs. Fearing prosecution, she paid the teacher to help her put the body in a field. A farmer, thinking it was a thief, struck the body with a stick. He too paid the teacher to remove the corpse. The teacher placed it in a sack and carried it into the woods, where he discovered some robbers. He took one of their sacks, leaving the sack containing the body with them. (Qtd. in Ashliman 1987, 263–264)

“The Woman in the Chest” narrative, although consisting of little more than the single motif (K2151), does demonstrate some wonderful
complexities. For example, although the reference to the teacher’s thiev-
ery disappears after the first sentence, it is still implied that he is guilty;
and he most definitely is guilty of the murder of an old woman, the
mother of a priest. The teacher is rewarded for his deceptions: he is paid
three times for the same body and, although not stated directly, the rob-
bers’ sack that he absconds with probably contains some kind of booty.
None of the other characters’ assumptions of responsibility for the death
of the old woman demand that they do anything other than hire some-
one else to save them from prosecution or bother. If we can extrapolate
from this narrative the development of specialized services, particularly
those surrounding death, like that of undertakers and funeral directors,
then a fascinating portrait of socio-cultural guilt emerges. The priest
(who should be responsible for taking care of his mother’s corpse as
both family and vocational duties demand), the waitress, and the farmer
all pay someone else to do the work that they do not wish to do; in this
case, the distasteful duties of corpse disposal. Like the contemporary leg-
ends “The Runaway Grandmother” and “The Dead Cat in the Package,”
these funeral responsibilities are placed on another who is paid exclu-
sively for that kind of work, an aspect of this narrative in modern form
noted by both Brunvand and Dundes (Brunvand 1981, 119).

Like “The Woman in the Chest,” tale type 1537, which Aarne and
Thompson titled “The Corpse Killed Five Times,” tells a similar story: to
relieve themselves of the potential responsibility for someone’s death,
and the implied prosecution that entails, various individuals repeatedly
set up the corpse to shift the responsibility onto others. Richard Chase
tells this American variant titled “Old Dry Frye”:

An old man choked on a bone and died. Afraid that he would be accused of
murder, the host took the body to the road and propped it up. Some trav-
ellers thought the corpse was a highwayman and threw rocks at it. Seeing that
the man was dead, they thought that they would be hanged for murder, so
they leaned the body against a farmer’s shed. The farmer thought it was a
prowler and shot him. So it continued, until two rogues, also thinking they
had killed the man, tied the body to a wild horse and sent him on his way.
(Qtd. in Ashliman 1987, 264)

The difference between 1536 and 1537, according to the Aarne and
Thompson typology, is the emphasis on the disposal of the corpse
(1536), rather than the shifting of the blame (1537).

In *Weekend at Bernie’s*, two young insurance adjusters, one hard-working and dedicated to moving up the corporate ladder, the other immature, slovenly, and apathetic to anything other than having a good time, discover an error in the books. While working on an excruciatingly hot Sunday afternoon, Rich (Jonathan Silverman) and Larry (Andrew McCarthy) discover that four policies had been made out to the same person, and were filed weeks after that person was dead. Discovering this oversight recoups over two million dollars for the company. Rich and Larry are anxious for Monday to arrive so they can bring this to the attention of their boss, the jet-setting Bernie Lomax (Terry Kiser), and, they hope, receive a much overdue promotion.

Bernie is thrilled with the discovery and invites the boys out to his mansion in the Hamptons for the Labor Day weekend as a reward. In reality, Bernie is less than thrilled. He has been using the company to launder money for the mob, and Rich and Larry have just discovered Bernie’s dirty little secret. In desperation, Bernie consults mob boss Vito (Louis Giambalvo) for help, and requests that Vito arrange for Rich and Larry to be killed while at Bernie’s. Vito agrees, and Bernie retires home to arrange an airtight alibi.

Vito, however, thinks Bernie is getting to be more trouble than he is worth. Added to that, Bernie is having an affair with Vito’s girlfriend, Tina (Catherine Parks). Vito, instead of arranging for Rich and Larry to be killed, has Paulie (Don Calfa) go and murder Bernie before the boys arrive. The next day, when Larry and Rich arrive on Hampton Island, they discover that Bernie is dead, apparently the result of an accidental drug overdose. Before they can inform the authorities, a “floating party” of rich neighbors arrive, and suddenly Bernie’s home has turned into “Party Central,” with no one noticing that Bernie, propped up on the settee, is dead. He gets seduced, propositioned, and even ends up conducting business deals with his completely oblivious friends.

The next day, when Rich and Larry are once again going to attempt to contact the authorities, they discover Bernie’s plot against them. Because they are under the impression that the killer is still coming for them, and that the killer will not hurt them while Bernie is present, they concoct a series of ruses which give the impression that Bernie is still alive: dragging the corpse around, taking it boating, playing Monopoly, sitting in the sun,
and getting them into parties. Their masquerade is so successful that word gets back to Vito that Paulie did not kill Bernie as planned, and Paulie returns to the island to get the job done properly.

I have outlined the plot of *Weekend at Bernie’s* in such detail because, as a modern variant of AT1536, character motivation within a “realist,” or at the very least “plausible,” plot is needed in order for this traditional motif to be filmically realized according to the strategies of “classical Hollywood cinema,” the term given to how mainstream film constructs narrative logic. Other film narrative strategies begin with a traditional premise, and then the screenwriters develop the story to fill ninety minutes, as with *Alligator* (Teague 1980), where the contemporary legend about alligators in the sewers is the narrative catalyst for a Jaws-like man versus big animal film. *Weekend at Bernie’s* does the opposite. It wants to end up in the traditional narrative, and in order to get there, screenwriter Robert Klane develops the plot so we end up in AT1536, rather than using it as a narrative catalyst.

*Weekend at Bernie’s* is a modern variant of 1536A, “The Woman in the Chest”: to avoid being blamed for Bernie’s death, and to fool the real killer, Rich and Larry spend the weekend creating the illusion that Bernie is still alive. He is propped up on sofas during parties; he is placed on the patio with a string strategically tied both to one hand and to a pulley system so Larry can pretend that Bernie is waving to passers-by; his shoelaces are intertwined with those of both Larry and Rich for ease in walking (while Rich has his hand, ventriloquist’s dummy-style, up Bernie’s jacket holding his head up); and he is even propped up in a boat to allow the boys access off the island. Such are the ruses that Larry and Rich concoct in order to maintain the illusion that Bernie is still alive.

Like both AT1536 and 1537, the illusion that Bernie is still alive also confuses Paulie, who must constantly return to Hampton Island to finish his job. As in the traditional “thrice-killed corpse,” Paulie kills Bernie three times: once by the overdose injection that actually kills Bernie; secondly, when Bernie accidentally slips off of a deck chair and lands on Paulie, the killer thinks Bernie is attacking him and he strangles the already dead “assailant”; and thirdly, taking no chances this time, Paulie bursts into Bernie’s house and shoots the propped-up Bernie six times in the chest.

*Weekend at Bernie’s* also features another of Thompson’s motifs about corpses: Bernie’s alibi for when Larry and Rich are supposed to be killed allows him the freedom to be back in New York that night,
thence enabling him to have an illicit rendezvous with Tina. When
Bernie fails to show up at the appointed time, an angry Tina arrives on
the island wanting to know what his excuse is. She does not believe
Larry and Rich when they tell her Bernie is dead, and believes he is
asleep in his room, where the boys have propped him out of the way.
Tina goes up, but does not emerge for another half-hour, returning with
a self-satisfied postcoital grin. When the bemused boys ask “How was
he?,” Tina’s reply is “Never been better.”

Thompson identifies this kind of necrophilia motif as J1769.2.1. Unlike other forms of
necrophilia, where the living engage in intentional sexual relations with
a corpse, the essential dimension of this particular motif is the mistaken
belief that the corpse is actually alive. On the one hand, in films, this
can be represented by moments of horror—the unknowing person who
gets into bed with a dead body discovers this, and usually screams. Here
the comedy works in reverse: Tina is unaware that Bernie is dead, even
after, somehow, consummating their affair. Thompson distinguishes
between two kinds of necrophilia based on their placement in motif cat-
egories: the one most appropriate to Weekend at Bernie’s is this J-category
motif, classified by Thompson as motifs about “The Wise and the
Foolish.” More specifically, Thompson places this motif within the
“absurd misunderstandings” subcategory (J1750–J1849), an apt phrase
for this motif given the current filmic context (Thompson 1955–58, II:
445). Here Tina is obliviously foolish in not recognizing that Bernie is
dead. The other kind of necrophilia is intentional, and is classified by
Thompson under a completely different category, “Sex” (Thompson

This last motif also points towards some of the social criticism that
Weekend at Bernie’s, as a modern variant of AT1536 (1537), demonstrates.
I noted above that some of the traditional variants of 1536 and 1537
contain a subsumed social critique regarding the lack of responsibility
for the dead within a community. Frequently, these stories seem to posit,
it is just too easy to either blame or pay someone else to take responsi-
bility. Those who shirk their duty are rewarded for it. In Weekend at
Bernie’s, the satire is aimed differently: Larry and Rich are too innocent
to be accused of Bernie’s murder, and at no time is Bernie construed
as a “victim,” at least not in any way that would elicit audience sympathy
toward his death. Instead, the social criticism of the film is aimed at the
“Hampton’s Crowd,” whose self-indulgences and self-obsessions make
them oblivious to Bernie’s dilemma. Neighbours invade Bernie’s house,
drink his alcohol, borrow his boat, and generally take advantage of Bernie’s resources. Implied in all of this, as community standards on Hampton Island are never seen to be violated, is that Bernie is one of these people, and would, should the situation be reversed, be equally unaware if one of his neighbours likewise died. At first, Bernie is still “the life of the party,” as the film’s tagline reads: falling on people, coyly supplying drugs from his pocket (actually, his guests only think he is being coy), refusing to accept an offer on his car, and later, when Bernie falls off of his boat as Rich and Larry are trying to get away, he ends up doing a macabre impersonation of “body surfing/skiing,” much to the delight of his neighbours.

How alienated does a community have to be for this to happen? Roger Ebert, in his 1989 review of *Weekend at Bernie’s*, criticized the film, in part, because this kind of comedy requires “the other characters to be so stupid” as not to notice that Bernie is dead. But what if, in part, that is the point of the film? Ebert continues, “we can’t believe they could be so unobservant” (Ebert 1989). It is unlikely that the intended audiences for *Weekend at Bernie’s* are those who do spend their summers in the Hamptons, or write film columns for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The intended audiences for these films are more likely to be folk more akin to Larry and Rich than Bernie. In playing to that audience, director Ted Kotcheff and screenwriter Klane seem to be implying that from the perspective of Larry and Rich, and those like them, these characters are that “stupid” and “unobservant.” The film must have met with some kind of audience, for in spite of almost unanimously bad reviews at the time, it still pulled in more than thirty million dollars in domestic U.S. box offices.

In contrast to the moderate success of *Weekend at Bernie’s*, the inevitable sequel did less well, in part, I believe, because it did not “speak” to its intended audience the way the first one did. *Weekend at Bernie’s II* (1993) picks up almost immediately where the first one left off. Bernie is dead and in the New York City morgue; when the film opens, Rich and Larry (still played by Jonathan Silverman and Andrew McCarthy) are identifying the body (still played by Terry Kiser). As Larry signs for the release of Bernie’s possessions, they discover a safety deposit box key for an offshore account in the U.S. Virgin Islands. In order to get access to that safety deposit box, they’ll need to kidnap the dead Bernie and take him to St. Thomas.

Before they can do that, however, the mob, who want the laundered money Bernie had in his possession returned, takes action. They send
Charles (Tom Wright) and Henry (Steve James), two African American hustlers, to St. Thomas to consult with a voodoo priestess, the Mobu (Novella Nelson), who orders these two back to New York with a voodoo spell in order to resurrect Bernie. They hope that Bernie will then lead them to the missing two million dollars. While they are trying out their spell, Charles and Henry lose their live chicken and replace it with a pigeon. This substitution is not entirely successful, and Bernie can only be reanimated when music is playing. What ensues is a race between Charles and Henry, and Rich and Larry, to determine who will hold on to the reanimated Bernie and be led to the treasure.

There is a folktale aspect to all of this; “reanimated corpse used to find hidden treasure” sounds like a Thompson motif, but I could not find any such reference. The living corpse motif (E422) is about as close to a traditional reference as I could ascertain in Weekend at Bernie’s II. As I noted above, where reanimation occurs through a spiritual agency (demon, spirits, vampires, or, in this case, voodoo spells and music), it does fit within a certain aspect of folktale logic. Apparently this was insufficient to entertain an audience. Although Weekend at Bernie’s II was given a larger budget (for exotic location shooting in St. Thomas), the film’s gross domestic return was less than half of Weekend at Bernie’s (approximately twelve million U.S. dollars).

Could Thompson’s Motif Index determine a film’s success? Using his motifs does not. However, by utilizing a strong verisimilitude to traditional narrative patternings, which includes traditional motifs, a different series of demands on the audience emerges.

The degree to which the two Weekend at Bernie’s movies appeal to the general movie-going audience is the next aspect I wish to discuss. A crude, but useful, generalization is that when one speaks about mass media and the “general” audience, one is most often talking about oneself. Movie reviewers stand for the “average person,” someone hired, in theory, to view all the new movies released and report on their quality in local and national newspapers, so the “average person” risks less of their increasingly expensive evening out at the movies on films they would not enjoy. Yet by definition of the job, movie reviewers are not “average people”: anyone who views so many films per year is going to have a larger cache of filmgoing experiences with which to compare each new release. In their own way, and to varying degrees, movie reviewers are movie “experts”; they have a degree of knowledge that raises them ever so slightly above the everyday rank-and-file of movie audiences. As their
cache of filmgoing experiences increases, so does their overall knowledge of cinema, thereby they develop a greater awareness of film literature, by exposure to so many different forms of cinema and filmic narratives, a greater field of comparison is open to those few individuals who see movies as our surrogates. In addition to this, journalists (movie reviewers in particular) and, even to a greater extent, film scholars (those with an academic background in film studies), are often older, better-educated, and more bourgeois in their filmic tastes than the “average” moviegoer.  

Take, for example, Wally Hammond’s review of Weekend at Bernie’s, published in the British magazine Time Out:

A one-joke movie which moves puerile party humour from Animal House to the yuppie world of work . . . Kotcheff aims straight for the juvenile and spends most of his effort, successfully, on getting the timing right for the endless gags with Bernie’s cadaver propped up on the sofa, falling downstairs, etc. But it’s strictly kids’ stuff and quickly palls. (1999, 1150)

Although Hammond seemingly “enjoyed” the movie, or at least recognized the successful comic timing of the gags, phrases like “kids’ stuff” also demonstrate that, for him, somehow there isn’t enough to keep the film going. Perhaps the movie’s major flaw is identified in Hammond’s first few words, as he calls Weekend at Bernie’s “a one-joke movie,” a view echoed by both film critics Roger Ebert (1989) and Hal Hinson, the latter writing for the Washington Post (1989). Ebert criticizes the movie for its lack of sophistication, comparing it unfavorably to Alfred Hitchcock’s The Trouble With Harry (1955). Likewise, Hinson regrets that the gags with Bernie’s corpse are “played out coarsely.” Yet, as I noted above, Weekend at Bernie’s was surprisingly successful at the box office. Therefore, in spite of the film’s singular joke, its lack of sophistication, and coarse humor, somehow it found its audience.

One way toward explaining the dissonance between reviewers and audiences is based on the verisimilitude between Weekend at Bernie’s and the AT1536/1537 tale type. It has been suggested that the most direct way for individual fiction films to be considered “folklore” is to follow some of the theoretical writings that tie folklore studies to literature. Neil Grobman, for example, proposed that one must assess “how authors use folklore in their writings”. To follow this procedure requires the scholar to identify the author as being in direct contact with folklore and its scholarly debates (1979, 17–18). The problem with applying the “folklore and literature” debates to discussions about folklore and popular cinema is
that individual authors whose connection with “folk culture” are more readily proveable produce literary texts. Cinema and television are much more collaborative communicative media, and, therefore, if one is required to make a connection between the text and “legitimate” folk culture, whose connection is to be considered authoritative? Bird noted a more progressive approach towards the verisimilitude between folk culture and popular cinema: we need to look at the resonance between traditional narration and popular cinema, and see how similar narrative strategies can inform both folkloristics and film studies (1996).

In highlighting the relationship between orality and literacy, Walter Ong inadvertently pointed towards a further understanding of vernacular cinema, i.e., films which demonstrate high resonance with an audience, but whose quality may confound movie reviewers. In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong identifies the “psychodynamics” of orality: those cognitive processes which characterize primarily oral cultures. The terms that we, in our highly literate society, use to describe the world around us—our very “literate” worldview—are often inappropriate to describe the worldview of primary oral cultures. Ong notes that orality in mass-mediated, technological societies like our own does exist in a secondary capacity (1982, 11). Yet conceiving of oral “texts,” as well as other linguistic metaphors to describe primarily oral cultures, demonstrates our literacy prejudice (13). Ong notes that primary orality often lacks analytical discourse; that is, it lacks the discourse of introspection or self-reflexivity (30). Likewise, vernacular cinemas are often criticized for their lack of introspection and self-reflexivity, recalling Ebert’s criticism of *Weekend at Bernie’s* lack of sophistication.

Ong characterizes oral narrational strategies through a series of “psychodynamics,” which I now wish to turn to in order to discuss, perhaps, what appealed to audiences about *Weekend at Bernie’s*, despite the lack of verisimilitude to the critical criteria of mainstream movie reviewers. To begin with, Ong notes the importance of mnemonics and formulae for recalling oral information. “In an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes. You know what you can recall” (33).

In *Weekend at Bernie’s*, the frequent reiteration that Bernie is dead, that Rich wants to contact the authorities, or that someone is trying to kill Larry and Rich, is evidence of this phenomenon. It is not necessarily that movie audiences are slow to pick things up, or that because of MTV and the channel-surfing culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first
centuries, modern audiences have shorter and shorter attention spans. The way movie audiences receive and process information is not dependent upon literary models. Instead, this kind of reiteration moves the narrative plot forward without dependence upon literacy-like re-readings. Although we can go to see the same movie again, or rent and even purchase a videocassette of the film to watch whenever we want, these are secondary considerations for most moviegoing audiences. Films which demand rewatching, rewinding, and replaying are more "literary," in that in order to experience the narrative to its fullest, one needs to understand its overall structure. From a literary perspective, this demand is more "sophisticated," more like "quality literature." "In an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing" (35). Ong again notes:

Thought requires some sort of continuity. Writing establishes in the text a 'line' of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which emerges the material I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively. . . . There is nothing to backloop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. Hence the mind must move ahead more slowly, keeping close to the focus of attention much of what it has already dealt with. Redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer [and moviegoer] surely on the track. (40)

Elsewhere, Marshall McLuhan noted that film is one of his "hot media," that is, it is high definition. "High definition is the state of being well filled with data" (1964, 36). All information required to make sense of or enjoy a film needs to be transferred to the viewer in one sitting. In which case, orality models, particularly the psychodynamics of repetition and formulae, allow that "high definition" of data transference to occur more successfully than with literary models.

The characterizations in Weekend at Bernie's, painted in broad strokes, also demonstrate further verisimilitude with the psychodynamics of orality. To a literary audience, the "crude" polarizations within the film seem simplistic: neat, hard-working, responsible Rich/sloppy, lazy, irresponsible Larry; Rich's virtuous girlfriend, Gwen (Catherine Mary Stewart)/Bernie's adulterous gangster's moll, Tina; live Larry and Rich./dead Bernie; and so
on. But these binary oppositions, beyond Levi-Strauss’ paradigmatic structuralism (1993), are also one of the psychodynamics of orality:

The elements of orally based thought and expression tend to be not so much simple integers as clusters of integers, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses, epithets, . . . Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulaic baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight. (Ong 1982, 38)

Although Hal Hinson’s review of *Weekend at Bernie’s* gives a nod to the juxtaposition between the black comedy of the film and its sunny bourgeois beach setting, he still finds the film “coarse,” with “too many bimbos and too many drug jokes” (1989). In other words, the comedy of the film is too basic and, agreeing with Ebert, too unsophisticated. But those characterizations within the film are, I argue, the point: not in the sense of a sophisticated satirical juxtaposition of “bimbos” and “bourgeoisie”—satire being a literary phenomenon (see Bakhtin 1984)—but the film’s crudeness in characterization is a further dimension in the psychodynamics of vernacular cinema.

None of this is to say or even imply that *Weekend at Bernie’s* is in anyway a “progressive” film—that it somehow challenges the bourgeois notions of literary elitism. In fact, the ideology of the film is still quite conservative. Both Larry and Rich are white, American, male heterosexuals, who believe that if they work hard, they will get their reward. Even though they do not get promoted as expected for revealing the scam to the corrupt Bernie, they do end up with a suitcase full of money, and Rich gets the white, heterosexual, wealthy girl.17 *Weekend at Bernie’s II*, with its Caribbean setting, places African-American characters within its diegesis. However, these are equally crude stereotypes: Charles and Henry, street hustlers who dress stereotypically, or the Mobu, a voodoo princess. Although, in this film, it is Larry who gets a girlfriend, Claudia (Troy Beyer), an African-American native of St. Thomas, she and her father (Stack Pierce), seemingly the island’s only doctor, are also students of voodoo. Larry openly ridicules Claudia’s beliefs, thereby making any kind of sexual consummation between them unlikely, and avoiding the controversy of miscegenation. In case we are unsure that at some point when we were not looking, Larry and Claudia might have got up to something of which the most conservative audience member might disapprove, the final piece of voodoo magic requires the blood of a virgin (continuing the long list of stereotypes). The
only one who can offer said blood is Larry. Clearly, and in no uncertain terms, neither of the Weekend at Bernie’s movies are progressive in ideological terms. This, too, is one of Ong’s psychodynamics: to challenge the social order, to call it into question, or any of the precepts which make up that order, risks forgetting the generations of work which built it (1982, 41–42). Individually, an audience member may choose to accept, challenge, or otherwise problematize the films, but as a general address to a primarily audiovisual audience, vernacular cinema cannot encourage “intellectual experimentation” (Ong 1982, 41).

Nor can vernacular cinema, or primary orality, encourage intellectual experimentation in the realm of abstract and symbolic settings (Ong 1982, 42–43). Although the worlds of the Virgin Islands or the Hamptons may seem exotic, as they are to Larry and Rich, the banal and everyday world of New York City, the office, their apartments, and their general lifestyles, are all narrative contexts to which almost any audience can relate. Even the exoticism of St. Thomas and Hampton Island, which are treated as tourist destinations, underlines the verisimilitude to our own “lifeworld” (Ong 1982, 42). To create any kind of abstraction in setting, either symbolic or fantastic, requires analytical categories that are inaccessible to primary oral cultures. Likewise, in vernacular cinema, for an audience to engage with crude polarizations and stereotypical characters, the films must be set in a world to which they can immediately relate. During the opening credits of Weekend at Bernie’s, which sets the scene during a record-breaking heatwave, a mugger attempts to “stick up” Larry and Rich on their way to the office. Larry pushes the gun to one side and says to the mugger, “Aw, get your ass outta here, it’s too hot!” The scenario is a completely fantastic response to an all-too-real situation, being mugged in New York City.

Even Ebert’s criticism that the characters in Weekend at Bernie’s are just too stupid to be believed supports another of Ong’s psychodynamics: Ong notes that primary orality is characterized by an agonistic tone, that is, the scenarios are distilled into two opposing points of view:

Many, if not all, oral or residually oral cultures strike literates as extraordinarily agonistic in their verbal performance and indeed in their lifestyle. Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. . . . By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates that knowledge within a context of struggle. (1982, 43–44)
The binary oppositions noted above between Larry and Rich, and between them and Bernie, play an even larger role in vernacular cinema. The conflicts between these two camps, and the camps do shift within the diegesis, are the kinds of abstractions with which vernacular cinema, like primary orality, can operate. These oppositions encapsulate vernacular ideas that are demonstrated to the audience. In *Weekend at Bernie’s*, Larry and Rich want to spend the weekend on Hampton Island/Bernie wants them dead; after Bernie dies Larry still wants to party/Rich wants to call the police; Gwen wants to know the truth about what is going on/Rich does not want to tell her. Likewise, in *Weekend at Bernie’s II*, Larry and Rich want to get Bernie’s money/Charles and Henry want to get Bernie’s money; voodoo is used for greedy purposes by the Mobu/voodoo is used for constructive purposes to save Rich. These dichotomies encapsulate debates within the diegesis contextualized, the “lifeworld” of the intended audience, and are presented without the mediation of literary analysis.

I have tried so far to demonstrate the similarities between Ong’s primary orality and what I have been calling “vernacular cinema,” but is this comparison fair? Put differently, even though the two media have similar psychodynamics, they are describing very different phenomena. We experience cinema, whether elite “art cinema” or vernacular cinema, through time. As I noted above, although we can purchase a video-cassette and fast-forward or rewind to specific sections (made all the more immediate through DVD technology), to experience a film requires an ordered sequence of narrative processes. Skipping ahead, or going back to what one may have missed, although possible, is not part of general filmgoing. In other words, cinema is a largely homeostatic phenomenon. It is always experienced in the present, and references to the past are not referred to or demanded unless they have direct relevance to the present, just like primary orality, according to Ong (1982, 46). In particular, the classical Hollywood mode of filmmaking, whereby narratives are situated within contexts that demonstrate a high degree of verisimilitude to the experiential “lifeworld” (49), with the direct intention of the audience’s empathic participation in the diegesis (45–46), further underlines the similarities between primary orality and vernacular cinema. This is not to say that vernacular cinema is an equivalent of primary orality—once a culture has achieved literacy, I know of no way in which that can be forgotten—but it does suggest that vernacular cinema is a kind of *neo*-orality: a new form of orality, or, because of its audio-visual bias, an orality-like phenomenon.
Therefore, if movie reviewers approach films like *Weekend at Bernie’s* or its sequel from a literacy perspective, they are seeing films as though they were written instead of performed. This does the films an injustice. The address to their audience is not as literacy, or even quasi-literacy, but as audiovisual or neo-orality. As such, films like these need to be discussed within the context of the vernacular cinema tradition to which they belong.

Audiovisual neo-orality explains the address to the audience for films such as *Weekend at Bernie’s*; it does not explain why the first film succeeded and the sequel did not. If I am even partially correct in my connection between the psychodynamics of primary orality and the address of vernacular cinema, then the content must also be vernacular.

Folk narrative traditions, like the folktale, are one type of narrative content that has stood the test of time; these narratives would not be passed on to subsequent generations unless they had some relevance to the supporting culture. In fact, Dégh has noted that when folktales cease to reflect the culture they do indeed fall into disuse (1989). Folktales and narrative motifs regarding the problems of getting rid of a dead body, for example, can be told as jokes, be found as motifs in longer folktales, or even recontextualized on Hampton Island today in a movie.

The idea of problematic corpse disposal still has currency today (to the tune of over thirty million dollars in the case of *Weekend at Bernie’s*). It does not matter whether screenwriter Robert Klane has *a priori* knowledge of this folktale or motif, or not. It has been circulating in such a way as to connect with him profoundly enough to write the story in the first place. Something about it had a resonance, and he was able to convince others of that resonance, too. *Weekend at Bernie’s II*, on the other hand, only had the resonance of the first film’s success. By not developing other vernacular narratives, in spite of the vernacular form of address, it did not have resonance with the audience.

But this current research is only a start. We need to further investigate not only how contemporary filmmakers use traditional materials, for example, tale types and folktale and legend motifs, but how those audiovisual texts are then received by their intended audiences. These motifs, with or without recourse to Ong’s psychodynamics, need to be explored more fully in other comedy horror films, like Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead*, or George Romero’s *Dead* trilogies. Further work needs to be done as well, on the relationship between ogre motifs and spirit motifs, and
how these in turn are represented in contemporary horror cinema. This essay has merely scratched the surface of this topic.

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