

**RHETORICAL SUBJECTIVITY AND IRONIC DISCOURSE:  
CONCENTRIC IRONY THEORY**

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **CONTEMPORARY IRONY THEORY**

There are few subjects in the study of rhetoric that elicit such passionate responses as the discussion of irony. Largely ignored from the end of the eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, irony has enjoyed a resurgence of critical discussion in the past several decades. The primary point of dissension between proponents and opponents of ironic argument lies in its very nature to push the boundaries of argument and persuasion, exploding contemporary persuasion theory and leaving critics to sort through the debris. Wayne Booth noted that, “[f]or both its devotees and for those who fear it, irony usually is seen as something that undermines clarities, opens up vistas of chaos, and either liberates by destroying all dogma or destroys by revealing the inescapable canker of negation at the heart of every affirmation” (Booth, 1974, p. ix). Since irony’s resurgence, many have found it “ubiquitous” (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 1) and “elevated to the role of a universal and defining literary attribute” (Handwerk, 1985, p. 1).

This thesis traces the contemporary trajectory of irony and examines its current status in argumentation. It then explores the dangers that face ironic rhetors and the shortcomings of contemporary irony theory as it attempts to engage these dangers. This discussion then will formulate a new vision of irony as concentric irony theory, and

utilize the performance punk/metal band GWAR as a case study for the theory. Re-envisioning irony not as a singularity but rather a dynamic system of intersecting spheres will allow ironic rhetors and critics alike to sidestep the dangers inherent in contemporary irony to take full advantage of this argumentation form.

As more and more contemporary arguers are being drawn to irony, the question becomes whether this will allow them to safely navigate the seas of persuasion or if it is the result of the Siren's call, ultimately dooming these rhetors. The purpose of this initial chapter is first to analyze the available literature and detail the limitations existing irony theory faces. Second, this chapter proposes an alternate way of conceiving of ironic performances, and, finally, provides a justification for the need to re-examine how irony is perceived and utilized in rhetorical research.

### Review of Literature

Irony is defined most simply as an utterance that “asks the reader/hearer to interpret the message in opposition to the literal message” (Tretheway, 1999, p. 141). Irony undeniably is of central import in the academic discussion. Booth (1974) wrote that, “[e]very good reader must be, among other things, sensitive to detecting and reconstructing ironic meanings” (p. 1). Communication studies scholars have long discussed the rhetorical value of irony; however, its very nature is one that denies a static interpretation (Burke, 1962; Hagen, 1995). Booth has argued that “from the earliest discussion of irony it has been something that, like metaphor, will not stay graciously in an assigned position, something that in fact can easily and quickly expand its own peculiar appeals, move toward dominance, and become some kind of end in itself” (Booth, 1974, p. 138). Irony continually pushes the barriers of accepted argument and, more importantly, accepted argument form.

The term can be further complicated when one moves from its simplest incarnation of a terminal point on a linear axis to one that is dynamic and transcendent of its time and place. Wilde has argued that irony has gone through three distinct iterations: a premodernist, a modernist, and a postmodernist irony. The distinctions he noted are that a premodernist irony sought to confirm harmony, that modernist irony sought to acknowledge and move beyond apparent inconsistencies, and that postmodernist irony sought to create fragmentation, looking for cracks in the armor (Wilde, 1982).

Traditional irony has focused primarily on that which has been intentionally created by humans utilizing their language systems to produce two mutually exclusive interpretations of an utterance. For example, to say, “what lovely weather” during a downpour forces the hearer to either interpret this utterance in its literal form or its ironic form, but never both. The reader must either determine if the speaker genuinely likes the drenching rain, or if s/he is being sarcastic, as it is impossible to both love and despise the existing weather. This form of irony was identified by the rhetoricians of antiquities late in their era but was quickly pushed to the background by the meaning of irony that is attached to common events and is accidental in nature. For example, an airline pilot who dies as a passenger in a commercial aircraft crash is not an intended event and rather is an irony of common events. This thesis deals exclusively with intentionally created ironies and these ironies of situation are not the ironies discussed here.

Critical use and acclaim of intentionally constructed irony was reactivated in the mid-twentieth century, even though it had been used extensively in literature for centuries before. This form of irony, however, was not limited to literature, but was present in “every kind of communication” where ironic utterances appeared “covert, stable and localized” (Booth, 1974, p. 7). This notion of covert, stable and localized messages was

the focus of traditional irony. Irony was always delivered with a wink and a nudge, but never was explicitly labeled as “ironic”. Writers assumed that a sophisticated reader/hearer would use clues, or rhetorical markers, within the discourse to decipher its ironic nature. These rhetorical markers also were considered to provide a stable reading for a conscientious reader, ensuring that inappropriate or incorrect readings would not occur. Further, the localized nature of irony in traditional theory ensured that these covert and stable utterances would be correctly interpreted, as the ironies were not contextualized against anything except themselves. Unfortunately, these traditional theories come up short in light of our more fragmented times. It is impossible for ironies to exist as stable entities given the different points of entry that divergent readers will bring to the artifact. Traditional irony had been outgrown by the complexity of the modern world.

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century (the “postmodern world”) was dubbed the Age of Irony where “many Americans enjoyed the pleasures of ironic detachment, skepticism, satirical humor, and at times, a downright lack of caring, when it came to both private and public affairs” (Gibbs, 2002, p. 145). For some, this detachment was a “rhetorical and structural strategy of resistance and opposition” (Hutcheon, 1992, p. 12). Proponents argued that subversive irony gave voice to those detached from the mainstream ideology and allowed them an opportunity for self-reflection and critical discussion from the periphery. For others, irony was indicative of an innate hollowness that was encompassing the country. They contended that, “contemporary irony shrugs off, doubts and reassembles significance to drain words of evocation, beauty and moral weight” (Purdy, 1999, p. 203). Opponents of subversive irony argued that the form itself mirrored the shell that was the postmodern world.

Proponents argued that attempts to discount ironic argument with such powerful language, however, only codified the power that this particular form carries and lent credence to arguments that ironic utterances can and do exist as oppositional voices to the stability of the status quo. Additionally, proponents argued, the extended creativity irony allowed to rhetors and audiences could break a cycle of routine in which many find themselves confined (Moore, 1999). A deconstruction of the cycle of the banal could allow both critics and rhetors alike an avenue of expression that is separate from traditional forms, which in turn could include a closer discussion of issues and discursive strategies.

Traditional irony forces the reader/hearer to acknowledge the inconsistencies between the literal and real meanings and actively engage the artifact to reconcile the incongruities. Functionally, this should create an active connection and simultaneous removal between the reader/hearer and the artifact as well as between the reader/hearer and the rhetor (Foss & Littlejohn, 1986). Postmodern subversive irony, however, asks the reader/hearer not only to interpret the message in opposition to the expressed meaning, but to recognize “an attitude of simultaneous complicity with and detachment from social conventions; simultaneous doubt and belief; simultaneous seriousness and play” (Pearce, 1989, p. 202). Traditional ironies asked the reader/hearer to identify only two meanings, the stated and the real. Postmodern ironies, however, encourage fragmentation and multiple readings at both levels. Simply put, postmodern subversive ironic strategies, by their very nature, encourage the reader/hearer to create multiple possible interpretations at both the stated and the real level branching out indefinitely (Swearingen, 1991). The impact of multiple competing interpretations is articulated when Shugart outlined another important aspect of ironic utterances. She noted that,



“irony commands a simultaneous engagement with the artifact and a detachment from it, in order to assess the disparity” (Shugart, 1999, p. 434). This forces the reader/hearer to become intimately involved with the argument of the artifact while removing himself or herself from the artifact itself. This creates a tenuous position for the reader/hearer of navigating through an ocean of argument form that makes simultaneous contradictory calls that reflect the postmodern nature of the contemporary world.

While postmodern subversive irony unquestionably can clear space for alternative voices and oppositional readings, the form itself can be problematized if discussed from an audience perspective. The potential for multiple interpretations means that “irony ‘risks disaster more aggressively than any other device’ because of the possibility that the audience won’t ‘get it’ ... The multiple, complex, and inconsistent messages postmodern, subversive irony advances can be confusing, thereby prompting an audience to dismiss the artifact as incoherent” (Shugart, 1999, p. 438). While the recognition of incongruities is necessary for ironic argument, the dismissal of the artifact as incoherent is problematic if the goal is subversion. Shugart contends that, “[a]s such, asserting congruence at the outset may be necessary in order to establish the premise for the perspective by incongruity, on which subversive irony turns” (Shugart, 1999, p. 453). She continues by explaining that postmodern subversive irony further demands this congruence because there must be a stable premise from which the paradoxical multitude of interpretations may grow. While beginning with a stable premise may allow the rhetor to negotiate around the problem of artifact incoherence, it risks replicating hegemonic discourse and gutting the efficacy of ironic argument that may be gained through audience engagement and bond.

In order to create a stable premise, the rhetor must engage in the language of the

dominant discourse s/he seeks to subvert. This inevitably runs the risk that “the ironic text may inadvertently reify and reproduce” that very discourse (Shugart, 1999, p. 439). The reason this danger exists lies in the desire of the rhetor to create a stable artifact for a consistent reading. Functionally, the reader/hearer must use the hegemonic point of entry to engage the artifact, thus replicating the dominant mindset and eviscerating the opportunity to share in the ironic subversion. Critical to this discussion is the notion of *opportunity*. A reader/hearer can decontextualize the stable premise from the ironic artifact in an effort to engage the irony, though that person is one for which the stable premise can be non-existent. For one who needs no stable premise to engage the artifact, there is no net increased *opportunity* for rejoinder, only the *opportunity* that pre-existed. A reader/hearer who needs the stable premise to avoid incoherent dismissal is one that is likely to key in on those utterances that are intuitive to their subject positioning. This creates an environment where a reader/hearer may be open to engage the irony; however, the presence of a stable premise removes the *opportunity* by focusing the attention on the hegemonic point of entry.

Further, the possibility for audience engagement can be irrevocably broken with a stable premise. Shugart notes that superiority, where an elite community of an “in-group” who “gets” the joke is formed, is critical to ironic argument because it creates cohesion with the rhetor. This audience agency is even more important to subversive postmodern ironic argument. Shugart writes that:

In the case of subversive irony, superiority is more complex. In the first place, audience agency appears to be constrained. The specifically postmodern nature of subversive irony appears to cater to and thus invite a particularly postmodern audience. Postmodern irony is highly abstract and esoteric, characterized by and cultivating paradox and fragmentation ... require[ing] a fairly “hip,” postmodern audience. For audiences not versed in postmodernism and unskilled in productively negotiating

paradox and multiplicity of meaning, subversive irony may be confusing, overwhelming, or even salutary ... (Shugart, 1999, p. 454)

This requirement of the audience to understand and be versed in postmodern theory and criticism seems to put an unfair onus on the people whom this argument is intended to persuade. Merely living in a postmodern world and experiencing the multitude of interpretations seems to be insufficient, as there are always events that make irony appear passé. Robert Terrill argues that “[i]rony, periodically, is declared dead. Some event occurs that makes it seem impossible to gaze on the world with an air of cool detachment, and irony suddenly seems to be an indecent luxury. Decisions must be reached, judgments must be made, actions must be taken, and the time for disinterested ironic play has passed” (Terrill, 2003, p. 216). The oscillations of the postmodern world itself create an environment where the ironic rhetor cannot assume the reader/hearer is adequately tuned to the necessary vacillations of fragmented postmodern text. This, then, raises the specter of political agency and brings into question the efficacy of ironic utterances in general.

The potential for irony to create a situation where political disengagement fills in the gaps and ultimately becomes the parasite of the irony’s liberatory action is a genuine threat. This returns the discussion to Purdy, who contends that the nature of irony is such that a moral culture can never be created through ironic engagement. He contends that the detachment from center that is necessary for irony is the same center that holds the foundations for morality and the call for moral action. Terrill notes that ironic rhetors find themselves in a terrain where they must simultaneously call for ironic detachment *and* political action. He writes, “the political potentials of irony are animated by a dilemma: irony that would be politically productive cannot be sustained indefinitely

because it must find its culmination in action, but action spells the end of irony ... Irony turned toward political ends, then, is sacrificial calling for its own termination” (Terrill, 2003, p. 233). Making these simultaneous and contradictory calls by the rhetor plays havoc with the nature of audience agency.

The question must then be raised as to whether postmodern subversive ironic argument can allow for audience agency and whether there can be ironic utterances that do not recreate the hegemonic discourse. The understanding and consent of an audience versed in postmodern theory seems certain as this audience is both equipped and receptive to the irony’s postmodern nature and that which it seeks to subvert. The understanding and consent of an audience *not* versed in postmodern theory, however, seems much less certain. In fact, certainty seems to lie firmly in favor of their dismissal at best and replication of the dominant discourse at worst. Even if they were to see the irony, their reading would likely be superficial, and the potential is great for the reader/hearer not versed in postmodern theory to note the irony but miss the simultaneous call for the collapse of the irony to create space for political action. Defusing the opportunity for political action is acceptable for those who view irony as an enjoyable and respectable endeavor in and of itself, but for those who view ironic utterances from a point of subversion, it is unforgivable as political change is their terminal goal.

With these dangers facing the ironic rhetor and the virtual dismissal of the importance of audience subjectivity, it is necessary to look for new theories of ironic argument that can maneuver through and around these limitations without constraining the effectiveness that irony offers.

#### A Brief Look at Ironies as Concentric

Rather than re-package traditional irony theory under a new name, we must

uproot the existing notions about what the responsibilities of postmodern subversive ironic argument are and reformulate them into an entirely new theory. This thesis offers the possibility of concentric ironies as such a reformulation. Rather than conceiving of each individual irony in a performance as existing by itself in a vacuum, each irony in an overall performance builds within one another, creating an ironic map of overlapping performances. Up to this point, the terminology used to describe irony has utilized labels such as “utterance” and “ironic language” and “artifact”. While I do not disavow use of these terms, I feel it is not inconsistent to conceive of irony as a performance. In fact, it is the conception of irony *only* as an utterance or a singular artifact that confines ironic rhetors. When we expand our current notions we will find an argumentative landscape, created by the ironic cartographer, within which we may place ourselves in any of multiple intersections of overlapping ironic utterances.

There are multiple questions that contemporary irony theory has failed to answer. Is it possible to create an overall understandable and subversive ironic performance without replicating the hegemonic discourse? Is it possible to, simultaneously, ask the reader/hearer to detach himself or herself from the political center and make a call for political action? And finally, is it possible to answer “yes” to either of the preceding two questions without stripping away audience agency?

This thesis explores the conceptualization of ironies not as static singularities, but as layered, spherical intersections existing independently and interdependently upon one another. Such a concentric perspective answers each of these questions and allows the ironic rhetor to effectively engage in postmodern subversive ironic argument. As a starting point for evaluating this theory, the rhetoric of G.W.A.R. is used as a case study.

### The Case Study

GWAR is a performance punk/metal band based out of Richmond, Virginia. Their first album, “Hell-O”, was released in 1988 and they have been producing and performing almost non-stop since. As of this writing, the band has released 12 albums, 9 full-length DVDs, starred in their own comic book, and been the inspiration for an extraordinarily complex miniature role-playing game, “Rumble in Antarctica”. They have spawned multiple “spin-off” bands made up of current and former members of the band, including the X-Cops, the Hellions, the Dave Brockie Experience, and Death Piggy. They founded their own production company and record label (Slave Pit, Inc.), defied zoning ordinances to build a full-sized castle in their hometown of Richmond, and were nominated for two Grammy Awards. In the past 16 years, they have never stopped touring, and it is their live show that makes GWAR a stand-out in terms of publicity. Dressed in rubber costumes and taking on a variety of stage personas, GWAR mocks the destruction of life in every show, dousing the audience with a variety of faux bodily fluids. GWAR founder Dave Brockie (Oderus Urungus) notes that, “[w]e have as much to do with *CATS* [the musical] as we do with Black Sabbath. It’s a theatrical production – way off-Broadway theatre brought to you in a punk rock/metal venue” (Carman, 2004). The “theatrical production” and the controversy it generates brought GWAR to *The Jerry Springer Show* in 1994 under the title of “Rape Rock” and stands as one of the greatest examples of the band’s notoriety.

No performance group in recent history has generated the negative response, by the people who have failed to get the joke, as has GWAR. An article entitled “More of the Same Repugnance” argued that GWAR was “VILE, disgusting, warped, twisted, diseased, obscene, demented, morally reprehensible, [and] devoid of merit - these

descriptions are not strong enough to convey the essence of GWAR's performance" (Jacobs, 1994, p. 7D). *The Washington Post* called GWAR, "the most disgusting band in the world" ("Here and Now", 1994, p. G3). Music reviewer Emily Pettigrew called her GWAR exposure "the worst concert-going experience of [my] career" noting that the performance was filled with "inexcusable, gratuitous violence" (Pettigrew, 1997, p. 7E). Tabloid newspapers in England wrote that GWAR was "turning teen-age rock fans into PARENT KILLERS", attention that resulted in the cancellation of several performances (West, 1991, p. 34). In the United States, lead singer Dave Brockie was arrested in North Carolina for "intentionally disseminating obscenities" (McCarthy, 1992, p. 2).

While controversy most certainly follows GWAR, not everyone is opposed to their performance. Mike Little described GWAR as "the victory of irony over seriousness ... GWAR has its tongue camped in its cheek. In the Kingdom of the Dumb, GWAR gets the joke" (Little, 2004, p. C05). When the police forced a show in Athens, Georgia to be cancelled, the American Civil Liberties Union sued the city and won a victory for free speech (Zucco, 1999, p. 1D). GWAR themselves are quick to point out the irony of their performance. Hunter Jackson, who plays Techno Destructo, was quoted in the *St Louis Post Dispatch* as saying, "[i]t's a reflection of our society, part of what they're trying to do is push the envelope, sometimes that means taking the satire to its extreme. When we advertise that you can get a dollar off at the door if you bring the severed head of one of your parents, people understand that that's a joke" (Newcomb, 1994, p. 4E). Even the biography of the band reads like a set-up to a low budget horror film. Christine Laue tells the story of GWAR's history.

The group claims to consist of all-powerful interplanetary warriors, descended from aliens stranded in Antarctica. The Master of All Reality, displeased that they had sex with apes, had banished them to Antarctica,

where they were entombed in ice until hairspray chemicals depleted the ozone layer and they thawed. GWAR was reborn when Sleazy P. Martini, reputed underworld figure, music mogul and ex-U.S. congressman, discovered the group after his private jet-copter crashed in the frozen wasteland. After Martini saved them, the members - Oderus Urungus on vocals, Flattus Maximus on guitar, Jizmak da Gusha on drums, Beefcake the Mighty on bass, and Balsac the Jaws of Death on guitar - rekindled their mission of enslaving the human race (Laue, 2002, p. 7).

For many, the only thing more shocking than GWAR's back-story was that some people actually missed the irony.

Regardless of which side of the GWAR debate one comes down on, it is undeniable that the group produces a wake of controversy with both opponents and proponents making serious claims in efforts to justify their position. For a new theory of irony, such a "shock rock" performance should be perfect to provide a necessarily rigorous test. For this thesis, audio and video texts that span the recording career of the band are examined. In particular, the analysis closely articulates how particular songs and performances act as concentric ironies to create an overall ironic argument.

### Justification

In the midst of the academic debate about irony, the world changed and irony found itself at the crossroads following the attacks of September 11, 2001. After such a tragedy, many asked, how was it possible for one to be so flippant and detached from the political environment? How was it possible to belittle, with humor, the bravery of the firefighters that risked their lives to save others? How was it possible to be sarcastic in the face of a government that invested billions of our tax dollars to protect us? Following the tragedy of that day, irony was officially declared dead. Spokesperson for Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, Tony Fox, asked the Associated Press, "what's funny about what's unfolding here? Nothing ... Irony is dead" ("When Can We Laugh Again?" 2001,



p. F01). The loss of our national ironic disposition had advanced to where “some of our most archly funny comics ... appear outright fearful of being funny” (Leiby, 2001, p. C01). The fear that many felt of appearing unsympathetic to those most closely affected by the tragedy was leapt upon by many who wished to bury irony. Among those who declared irony dead were widely read magazines *Newsweek*, *Time* and *Vanity Fair*. Even *ADWEEK*, a magazine that charts development trends in mass media (most notably television), noted the demise of irony. “In the wake of Sept. 11 ... [i]rony [is] dead” (Goldman, 2002, p. Lexis/Nexis).

Over time, however, it became increasingly clear that the demise of irony was an exaggerated claim. Raymond Gibbs noted that it was impossible to ignore the irony that permeated the United States’ actions after the attacks on September 11. He outlined how the government was obsessed with capturing Osama Bin Laden even though the United States supported Bin Laden in the 1980’s during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, how Pakistan went from being a “rogue nation” that sponsored terrorism to one of the United States’ greatest allies in the “War on Terror” because of its proximity to Afghanistan, and how Operation Infinite Justice is “doing the very things to the people of Afghanistan that Americans are so furious about for being done to them on September 11, 2001” (Gibbs, 2002, p. 148). Even the language of the day was redeployed by the youth of America in ironic ways, for “despite pronouncements after the attacks that irony was dead, Sept. 11 found its way into teens’ slang. Attractive boys were ‘firefighter cute.’ Someone wearing unstylish clothing was asked, ‘Is that a burqa?’ Messy bedrooms were ‘ground zero.’” (Squatriglia, 2002, p. A3). Not only was irony alive and well, it seemed to be an important aspect of the healing process. Gibbs (2002) writes that,

[I]rony has an important place in our language (and thoughts) as we

confront the uncertainty of the events rapidly unfolding around us. Many Americans now experience significant cognitive dissonance as we struggle to reduce the intellectual and emotional stress of holding irreconcilable ideas or perceptions. One result of that cognitive process is the strongly felt intuition that irony is still all around us. Far from being an optional strategy for commenting on life's events, irony is a natural outcome of our conceptualization of situations or of our own internal thought processes. We must not celebrate, or mourn (depending on your view), the death of irony, but learn to love irony all over again because we need it now more than ever.

Irony exists in almost every aspect of our modern lives. The "death of irony" can never remove situational irony, thus we must embrace language-manufactured irony to assist us in dealing with the irony all around us.

While the death certificate of irony has yet to be signed, the world in which the form exists unquestionably has changed. The new world metamorphosis has accelerated the claims of both sides of the irony debate and forced a sense of urgency on those who wish to articulate visions of irony that can serve as a political vehicle for change. Lured by the Sirens' call, postmodern subversive ironic rhetors may find themselves shipwrecked on new obstacles, crushed by the merciless sea. Rather than give up on irony as a political strategy, though, it is necessary to reconfigure postmodern subversive ironic argument in such a way that overcomes the incoherent dismissal barrier and does not fall prey to hegemonic replication or the loss of audience agency.

In Chapter 2, the reformulation of contemporary irony is developed as "Concentric Irony Theory". In Chapter 3, the rhetoric of GWAAR is examined as a litmus test for the effectiveness of this new theory, and Chapter 4 examines where limitations to this theory may lie and offers possible solutions and directions for future refinements.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **SUBJECTIVITY AND CONCENTRIC IRONY THEORY**

There are many problems concerning contemporary irony theory; the most immediate is incoherent dismissal. If the reader/hearer is unable to understand that the utterance is intended as ironic, and takes the utterance at face-value, it will be impossible for the rhetor to extend his/her genuine argument for consideration to effectuate political change. Ironic rhetors are able to overcome incoherent dismissal through the use of the stable premise; however, there also exists a host of other problems. The stable premise carries with it the potential to replicate the hegemonic discourse and reinscribe the very system that the ironic rhetor seeks to subvert. Further, use of the stable premise plays havoc with audience agency, forcing a singular point of entry into the dialogue by the reader/hearer or creating an unrealistic expectation of a postmodern background so that the reader/hearer may recognize the multitude of interpretations. This chapter will attempt to address these concerns by using the work of Jacques Lacan to add a new tool to the ironic rhetor's toolbox. An alternative theory of irony utilizing this new tool will then be outlined.

Many rhetorical critics have recently moved Jacques Lacan "out of the rarefied space of the analytic situation ... into the service of ideological critique" (Biesecker, 1998, p. 222). Lacan's writings turned the attention of psychoanalysis to rhetorical

studies with his discussions of language and the structure of the unconscious, while many rhetorical critics have returned the gaze to the psychoanalytic community noting that “many of the research interests presently emphasized in our discipline ... parallel those noted by Lacan as being seminal to furthering the understanding of the psychoanalytic experience” (Hyde, 1980, p. 96). Scholars such as Slavoj Zizek and Judith Butler are increasingly rescuing the work of Lacan from Freudian psychoanalysis, but his insights have yet to be incorporated into comprehensive theories of ironic discourse.

### The Structure of Language and the Unconscious

Contemporary irony theory finds itself trapped between divergent, but equally compelling, arguments that question its fundamental efficacy. Some opponents of ironic discourse argue that no theory can explain both linguistic and non-linguistic forms of irony. Other opponents of irony argue that existing theories artificially manufacture audience agency and space between the rhetor and reader/hearer in a search for praxis. Proponents of ironic discourse find themselves in the unenviable position of defending themselves against one of these claims while playing into the hands of the other. For example, a proponent, such as Shugart, may argue that the stable premise can account for both linguistic and non-linguistic ironic forms, but would then find herself under the gun of either artificially manufacturing agency, or removing it altogether, leaving no fundamental purpose for the ironic utterance. This chapter will argue that Lacan’s interpretation of the unconscious and the structure of language answers these concerns.

Lacan begins with the assumption that the unconscious mimics a structure that is similar to language. Breaking stride with other structuralists like Chomsky and Levi-Strauss, Lacan argues that the unconscious does not exist independently within a person, but rather is called into being through experience and the culture into which the being is

born. For Lacan, all unconscious desires and fears exist not as instinct, but as learned through structure. Instinct is a developmental stage that is learned, rather than inborn, from the pre-Oedipal stage. The separation from the other creates a lack in the infant and that lack then creates a need to satisfy its basic life functions. That need calls into being instinct as the infant's needs are attended to by others. From here, it is clear that instinct is a result of world experience and not that which is "natural". From the pre-Oedipal stage, instinct becomes structured through the cultural indoctrination of symbols. Functionally, this means that all experience is structured like language, and the only avenue available for the unconscious to manifest itself as the conscious is through the symbol manipulation of language (Lacan, 1966).

An important aspect of Lacan's approach to language is his inversion of the Saussurian algorithm. The Saussurian algorithm defines the linguistic sign as signified / Signifier, where the signified is the concept and the Signifier is a particular sound that creates a representation of that concept (Saussure, 1959). Lacan inverts the traditional Saussurian algorithm into Signifier / signified. His inversion is subtle as he never references it as an overt act, noting that the algorithm is "not reduced to this exact form in any of the numerous schemas in which it appears in the printed versions of the various lectures" (Lacan, 1966, p. 141). The inversion is important, however, as much of Lacan's theory of the unconscious is "based, in effect, on the primordial position of the signifier and the signified as distinct orders initially separated by a barrier resisting signification" (Lacan, 1966, p. 141). Further, all attempts to discuss the placement of the signified and the Signifier in the algorithm inevitably use language solidifying Lacan's claim that humanity has become the slave to the language that it has created. This primordial level of language interplays with the infant's primordial world experience and linguistic

experience that subjects all experiences of the infant to the world of the symbolic order. Simply put, language locks humanity into the symbolic world for every experience of the infant can only be articulated through language. Once the infant is able to manipulate the symbolic system into which s/he was born, they are then separated from the primordial world experience.

Confounding though it seems at first, Lacan paradoxically argues that the infant is at once separated from the symbolic order regardless of being born into a world of symbols. He argues that the symbolic order is separate from the infant until the infant enters the mirror stage and recognizes the “I” that separates the infant from the mother, recognizes itself as a self-sustaining individual and internalizes the need for symbol manipulation to interact with the human community. At first glance, this seems to contradict the instinct claims that Lacan made previously, but a closer examination reveals consistency in that Lacan does not play with the notion of the signified and the Signifier, but rather with the notion of instinct. Instinct is not born into the individual, but rather the individual is born into instinct where instinct is a learned effect derived from his/her interactions with symbol manipulation. This serves the purpose of justifying Lacan’s claims that the Signifier is the fulcrum from which all else is balanced where “the Oedipus complex [is] the pivot of humanization [and] a transition from the natural register of life to a cultural register of group exchange and therefore of laws, symbols and organization” (Lemaire, 1977, p. 92).

For theoretical discussions of irony, the superiority of the Signifier, and the structure of language in particular, is important. Ironic arguments are not necessarily entirely, or even exclusively, verbal; an ironic utterance does not have to make use of language to exist as an ironic utterance. However, even those ironic utterances that make

nonverbal arguments (e.g. a painting or a performance art piece without the use of language), are impossible to separate themselves from language, or more specifically, the structure of language. Lacan's theoretical justifications for the unconscious being structured like language are just as applicable there as they are to nonverbal ironic utterances. That being said, the theory detailed in this chapter, while applied exclusively to verbal instances of irony, are not limited to the verbal. The practices outlined here can be applied to every nonverbal instance of ironic argument from within the overarching structure of language that confines all human endeavors.

From his interpretation of language, Lacan creates three distinct orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. Tony Myers (2003) details the differences between the orders in his summary of the works of Slavoj Zizek. The Imaginary Order begins with the birth of the ego by an individual at the mirror stage where an infant recognizes its individuality by its own reflection in a mirror (which can be an actual mirror, or a figurative mirror manifest in another person). The ego is formed by recognition of incompleteness in the infant whereby the infant attempts to find its whole through the other of its own creation. For Lacan, the Imaginary Order is one to be viewed with disdain, for it is the individual's desire of completeness that allows humanity to become narcissistically self-obsessed with its reflection and destructive creations. The Symbolic Order is what we most often refer to as "reality" and encompasses most human interactions. It is the result of signifying chains that give us law and all social structures. The Symbolic Order provides us with the vehicle for human behavior and provides humans with the negative, allowing us to detail not only what things are but what they are not.

The Real Order describes that which cannot be known. While we consider the

Symbolic Order to be the real, it is the Real Order that is the actuality of the real. Lacan, however, offers that the Real is rarely actualized because its description is dependent upon words which inevitably draws it back to the Symbolic Order. Tony Myers describes the Real by saying that, “[i]f you can imagine a state in which it is impossible to differentiate between, for example, a tree, the ground in which it has its roots, the squirrel in the leaves and the sky that surrounds it, then that is the Real. As you can see, it is not something I can describe, because, by default, I have to use words to do so, identifying each separate element of the world” (Myers, 2003, p. 25). In answering the question, why should we care about the Real, Myers explains that we must “remember that the Symbolic and the Real are intimately bound up with each other. The Symbolic works upon the Real; it introduces a cut into it, as Lacan claims, carving it up in a myriad different ways. Indeed, one of the ways in which you can recognize the Real is by noting when something is indifferent to Symbolization” (Myers, 2003, p. 25). Žižek himself argues that, “for Lacan, the authentic act itself in its negative dimension, the act as the Real of an ‘object’ preceding naming, is what is ultimately *innomable*. ... [T]ruth is condemned to remain a fiction precisely in so far as the *innomable* Real eludes its grasp” (Žižek, 1999, p. 167). It is the attempt to name the Real that embroils it in the Symbolic Order; but that is not to say that the Real Order is fundamentally inaccessible. This chapter argues that access to the Real Order can be granted when one resists the temptation to name and accepts fragmented, contradictory ironic performances in relation to their flickering subjectivity as a bridge to the Real. The theory offered here allows both the rhetor and the critic access to the Real by accepting contradictory subject positions in relation to the ironic performance.

Lacan’s vision of language holds multiple implications for how ironic utterances



can be interpreted by the reader/hearer. From a postmodern perspective, Lacan's notions of subjectivity hold great promise as "interpret[ation], then, is to focus on exactly those elements of a text that refuse coherence and synthesis, that resist the too easy assimilation to a system" (Handwerk, 1985, p. 126). For Lacan, the subject can never be stable, for that stability would signal a movement from the Symbolic Order to the Real Order removing the humanity of the individual, reducing them to a product of causal determinism. Lacan's goal is the active evaporation of the subject that allows it to (re)create itself elsewhere, existent in multiple contradictory spaces, flickering in and out of existence as it interacts with the other. This chapter argues that reconceptualizing irony as intersecting concentric spheres will allow both the rhetor and the reader/hearer access to the Real Order as impermanent subjects without risking their irreversible evaporation.

### Fantasy in Lacanian Psychoanalysis

This chapter argues that ironic utterances are nothing short of performances that intersect and interact with one another. The ironic rhetor assigns himself or herself a role and then articulates paradigmatic positions based on his or her particular ironic disposition. That being said, the rhetor creates a fantasy world and asks the reader/hearer to accept, and many times play a role within, that fantasy construction. Understanding the fanstasm (Lacan's term for the created fantasy world) then, is an important precursor to any discussion of how fantasy may function inside of intersecting ironies. The first question that must be addressed is why humans engage in fantasy.

The question regarding why humans do what they do has been the subject of academic discussion since Aristotle. In fact, in *The Rhetoric*, Aristotle notes that one of the topoi is Pleasure. In Book I, Aristotle argues that, "to be pleased consists in

experiencing a certain feeling, and imagination is a kind of faint perception; and so the man [sic] who remembers or anticipates must carry with him [sic] some mental image of the object he [sic] remembers or anticipates. This being granted, it is clear that there are pleasures (since there is sensation) accompanying both memory and anticipation” (Aristotle, trans. 1997, p. 61). Aristotle notes that human pleasure is derived from the creation of a fantasy world where one can see himself or herself through memory or the anticipated projection of themselves into the fray. In *Poetics*, however, Aristotle contends that, “[i]f the more refined art is the higher, and the more refined in every case is that which appeals to the better sort of audience, the art which imitates anything and everything is manifestly most unrefined” (Aristotle, trans. 1932, p. 58).

Taken together, Aristotle’s argument is one where human pleasure should be derived from the most refined form of fantasy (requiring the most sophisticated audience) where the audience could detach themselves from the mundane experience of life and “remember” themselves in similar situations, though they had not actually experienced their memory at all. This would be an example of reality created in the pure Symbolic Order. Applying these Aristotelian precepts to Lacan, James McDaniel writes that, “[f]or Lacan, the fantasm is a way of *figuring* magnitude, and may tend toward either pathological or hypernormative extremes” (McDaniel, 2000, p. 51). Humans rely on their fantasy of the Symbolic Order to put the Real Order into perspective for them, which arguably explains the number of explosions in Hollywood summer blockbusters, the amount of sex on pay-cable television, and G.W.A.R.

The fantasy provides itself the underpinnings for political change in ironic utterances. In rhetorical studies, the discussion of fantasy is often limited to Ernest Bormann, the author of symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis (see

Bormann, 1973; Bormann, 1982; Bormann, 1985). However, I believe it a great disservice to view fantasy from such a myopic perspective, especially when “Bormann and his supporters are not interested in exploring the psychological need that fantasies seem to fulfill” (Gunn, 2004, p. 5). Lacanian psychoanalysis argues that investigation of these psychological needs is paramount. Žižek argues that, “the Lacanian notion of ‘traversing (going through) the fantasy’ ... precisely does *not* designate what this term suggests to a common-sensical approach: ‘getting rid of the fantasies, of illusionary prejudices and misperceptions, which distort our view of reality, and finally learning to accept reality the way it actually is’.” He continues, “on the contrary, we identify with the work of our ‘imagination’ even more radically, in all its inconsistency – that is to say, prior to its transformation into the phantasmic frame that guarantees our access to reality” (Žižek, 1999, p. 51). Fantasy provides us a gateway to the Real Order through imagination. Tony Myers writes that, “fantasy [is] a kind of frame through which we see reality. This frame offers a particular or subjective view of reality. It is permeated with desire and desire is always ‘interested’, that is, it always presupposes a certain point of view” (Myers, 2003, p. 99). This interested desire and a particular point of view holds immense value and danger for ironic rhetors because it can both construct a bridge to the Real Order that allows us fleeting glimpses of the Real, and it can trap us in the Real culminating in the permanent evaporation of the subject.

Discourse analysis has examined the possibility that language and discursive actions within fantasy may create the very product of analysis (Parker, 1992). Further, even if the vision of the fantasy itself is not artificially created, the reader/hearer can insert himself or herself into the fantasy in such a way that it distorts the original fantasy of the narrative (Parker, 2003). Here, ironic rhetors find themselves having the

opportunity to utilize fantasy to overcome the incoherent dismissal, but simultaneously risk mutation of the ironic project by an unintended participant (uneducated other) who has entered into the dialogue. For example, if a prisoner desires freedom, s/he may create a fantasy in which s/he is an eagle (the very incarnation of freedom, both literally and figuratively) soaring high above the prison. The desire for freedom has manufactured a fantasy that did not culturally exist prior to the desire, but now can become a part of a societal fantasy. The potential also exists though that an unintended participant may “misread” the fantasy. I think here of the Greek story of Icarus who became the literal transformation of man to bird in attempts to escape his confines. Many read the fable of Icarus as more of a theological story, in that attempts to reach God doom one to terrestrial death. The original intent of the fantasy might have been rooted in a desire for freedom, but is now twisted toward a new terminus, stripped of its original direction and misrouted from the desire that created it. Existing irony theory that recognizes the use of fantasy in ironic utterances has yet to answer these concerns, because they still insist that desire created fantasy. This is the fundamental problem that Shugart faces when she notes that irony may replicate the hegemonic discourse. She assumes, of course, that the discourse of fantasy may only (re)produce the chains that held down the desire that first created the fantasy. A close reading of Lacan, however, may provide us with an answer, provided we break from the notion that desire creates fantasy.

Lacan and Žižek reverse the line of questioning above and argue that the desire does not create the fantasy, but rather the fantasy creates the desire. Žižek argues that, “[f]antasy does not mean that when I desire a strawberry cake and cannot get it in reality, I fantasize about eating it; the problem is, rather: how do I know that I desire a strawberry cake in the first place? This is what fantasy tells me” (Žižek, 1997, p. 7). If fantasy acts

as the driving force behind the desire then there is no risk of mutation or incoherent dismissal, but the possibility still remains that the discursive act creates the product and runs the risk of undermining the fantasy and the efficacy of the ironic utterance.

McDaniel feels this claim is exaggerated.

The grand metanarratives, which images can both support and undermine have not gone under the hill but are activated to access power in times of need. The image is a point of potential identification and division, a site on which the drives and desires lean and to which they are oriented. It can be construed as a resource of tragedy and revenge, or one of comedy and reconciliation. And a mechanism or terministic screen with considerable promise for sustaining scholarly inquiry into the complex interplay between image, emotion, and power is the fantasm – both more and less than the Real (McDaniel, 2000, p. 64).

The metanarratives (fantasies) created by the ironic rhetor allow the reader/hearer to insert himself or herself into the fantasy and create a point of reflection upon their non-lived memories and desires. The reader/hearer is then given the opportunity to become part of the fantasy and play a critical role in its resolution, but can never play a malignant role for the desire is pre-scripted by the desire of the fantasy. Returning to the Icarus example, it is important that we relinquish the idea that a desire for freedom created the fantasy. The fantasy itself created the desire, be it freedom, or an attempt to reach God, or a variety of other interpretations that are possible. The fantasy created the desire, and it is the desire that can now be examined as a bridge to the Real. There is no possibility to “misread” the story, only to provide an interpretation that denies the reader/hearer access to the Real. Therefore, any reading that does not open visibility to the Real can be interpreted as a “misread”, but not one that is fundamentally damning to the rhetorical project. If we accept that desire does not create fantasy but, rather, fantasy creates desire, it provides reprieve for the reader/hearer and the ironic project as a whole. This is the safety net that Lacan provides for the ironic rhetor.

Critics of this claim, however, may express concern that this again raises the specter of audience agency, artificially manufacturing agency and removing choice. It should now be clear that a mere discussion of fantasy is insufficient to provide a satisfactory answer and a closer examination of Lacan's vision of subjectivity is necessary to fully address these concerns.

### Audience Agency and Subjectivity

Opponents of ironic argument often cite the seemingly paradoxical path this chapter has attempted to navigate through as a primary shortcoming of the argument form. Opponents have argued that because "misreads" are often explained away, the ironic rhetor artificially manufactures audience agency.

Critics who express concerns about audience agency may be said to be asking the wrong question. The question is not whether audience agency is manufactured, but rather, why the reader/hearer has the opportunity to decipher ironic utterances at the outset. For an ironic utterance to be decoded and for an audience to "lose" audience agency, there was a decision by the rhetor to engage in an ironic form at the beginning. Lacan argues that, "[t]he more functional language becomes, the less suited it is to speech, and when it becomes overly characteristic of me alone, it loses its function as language ... [t]he speech value of a language is gauged by the intersubjectivity of the 'we' it takes on ... For the function of language in speech is not to inform but to evoke. What I seek in speech is a response from the other. What constitutes me as a subject is my question" (Lacan, 1977, p. 84). The answer as to why a rhetor chooses irony as a form lies in his or her desire for self-identity and self-reflexivity.

Self-identity and self-reflexivity are necessary starting points for the subject position of the ironic rhetor and one of the more interesting aspects of irony is its

potential to shed light on subject positions that are currently obfuscated. Irony is one of the premier systems that allows for self-reflexive points of reference. Hutcheon argues that “[t]he modern world seems fascinated by the ability of our human systems to refer to themselves in an unending mirroring process” (Hutcheon, 1985, p. 1). The nature of irony makes rhetors conscious of the language system from which it is deployed, for it is the juxtaposition of the literal meaning to the sought meaning that plays with the arbitrary nature of language. This self-reflexive nature of irony allows both the rhetor and the reader/hearer to explore their knowledge base in reference to their language. Handwerk writes that, “[i]rony is further characterized by an impulse toward self-reflexiveness. The urge to know, which lies behind any ironic mind, leads inevitably to reflection upon the conditions of possibility and knowledge and eventually to consideration of the nature of the subject itself” (Handwerk, 1985, p. 172). The decision to use irony illuminates the subject position desired by the rhetor.

Community is not derived from language, but rather is reflective of a choice on the part of the rhetor. Handwerk articulates the power of language to unmask subject relations through irony.

The subject discovers in irony the degree to which it is dependent upon an alien language, speaking with the voice of the other. Yet Lacan illustrates for us how the apparent alienness of language stems from a false premise of individual subjectivity, one that fails to acknowledge the real source and structure of subjectivity. The notion of a subject is dialectically dependent on an idea of community, more an “it” than a “they”. The recovery of the subject from its apparent fragmentation requires then a recognition of that subject as product and member of its community. The subject is not defined by its attributes or even its actions, but by how it defines itself in using an inherited language (Handwerk, 1985, pp. 173-4).

The self-reflexive nature of irony that draws attention to the language it uses to construct its argument and the function of that language is important in the articulation and

deployment of the irony. Handwerk and Lacan describe a situation where it is not the irony that creates a community of those who fail to “get it”, but an active choice by those reader/hearers to ignore the option for self-reflection they have been offered. That being said, existing irony theory looks past the notion of subjectivity and refuses to account for the active decisions of the reader/hearers.

A problem that existing irony theory fails to adequately address is the existence of space between the rhetor and the reader/hearer. For an ironic utterance to hold the potential for change, the space between the rhetor and the reader/hearer must remain open for critical inquiry into that space. Opponents of irony argue that the call to action inevitably collapses the space between the rhetor and reader/hearer and renders the irony itself impotent. Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, brings a new sense of the other to the discussion. For Lacan, there exists an omnipresent “other” in the form of the unconscious, an other that is there, but never fully accessible or namable. This presence of the “unconscious other” gives us the innate ability to recognize the other as subject. Functionally, this means that the ironic rhetor always experiences an “other”, even if it is the “unconscious other”. The rhetor, then, is a subject who has made a conscious decision to use irony as a linguistic tool (as opposed to metaphor or a “straight” utterance) and now interacts with the reader/hearer as the “subject other”. Because the rhetor has experience with the “unconscious other” they now possess the ability to engage the “subject other” and maintain the space where they may “enact a dialectic in which that otherness is brought into being as a third term in their interlocution” (Handwerk, 1985, p. 128). An ironic rhetor seeks not only to speak to the reader/hearer, but to the space that exists between them. For example, if a man were to remark to his friend, “it certainly is a lovely day outside” when they were in the middle of a blizzard,



he would be speaking not just to his friend as a subject other, but to her ability to interpret his comment. Her interpretation is not the space, but is reflective of it. It is, of course, possible that the man is actually fond of blizzards and was making a “straight” comment on the weather. However, she knows him well enough to interpret his comment as intended ironic, which utilizes her position as the subject other to illuminate the space between them, space in which the unconscious other can be said to reside even prior to the comment being made.

While the above example is certainly an over-simplified instance, it does begin to illustrate the impact that Lacanian psychoanalysis can have on the discussion of irony. However, Lacan’s paradoxical limitations become more overt when we cycle back to the discussion of language. Agency of the rhetor is guaranteed through the self-reflexive decision to use irony as the mode of persuasion and the agency of the audience is guaranteed through their choice of subject position in relation to that irony, but both of these presuppose an ability to tag that agency, to name it. Lacan himself, though, is reticent to acknowledge this agency as possible for it requires the signification of the discourse. Assuming the discourse to be separated from the rhetor, the only discussion possible of the now-signified irony is through the limitations of a Signifier, closing off access to the Real Order. Lacan writes that, “we are at the palpable border between truth and knowledge; and it might be said, after all, that at first sight our science certainly seems to have readopted the solution of closing the border” (Lacan, 1966, p. 284). For us to be given a pass to the Real Order and be able to adequately address the efficacy of irony and audience agency, there must be an active decision by *both* the rhetor and the reader/hearer as to their subject position. On face, it would seem that this is an impossible request, which places us firmly behind the roadblocks currently facing

contemporary irony theory; however, this chapter argues that such a possibility does exist.

### Overidentification

Existing irony theory has yet to adequately explain how the space between the rhetor and the reader/hearer can be maintained for critical inquiry without either rendering the irony impotent (losing its “a wink and a nudge” subtlety) or permanently evaporating the subject. This chapter’s use of Lacan has equally failed to provide an answer to this now overriding question, for how is the rhetor to create an ironic discourse that allows the reader/hearer multiple simultaneous subject positions and maintain the space in which otherness is to reside? This question will become even more problematic when this chapter will argue that not only can this space be maintained, but that it can allow society, as a whole, to enter into a new mirror stage and build bridges to the Real.

The answer to this question lies with overidentification. This chapter has already detailed how humans are slaves to their symbolic systems, trapped by the language they have created. Žižek implicates this further by noting that these linguistic webs trap a subversive rhetor into speaking through and therefore for the system. Žižek notes that, “the basic feature of the symbolic order *qua* the ‘big Other’, is that it is never simply a tool or means of communication” (Žižek, 1998, p. 110). He argues that if a person were to slip and fall, and the person they were walking with were to say “whoops” for them, “its symbolic efficiency is exactly the same as it would have been had I done it directly” (Žižek, 1998, p. 110). For him, this instance is explanatory of why judges and kings seem to the outsider as mechanical, as robotic, for they are the “living embodiment of the symbolic institution” (Žižek, 1998, p. 110). If the institution always speaks through its subjects, then we are doubly trapped by our language. For Žižek, even the performative

act of speaking is coopted by the institutions where the rhetor is denied authorship of speech. Even Lacanian fantasy is an insufficient response, as Butler notes that such fantasy “thwarts the efficacy of the symbolic law, but cannot turn back upon the law, demanding or effecting its reformulation. ... Resistance is thus located in a domain that is virtually powerless to alter the law that it opposes” (Butler, 1998, p. 29). So, yet again, we find ourselves at the roadblock that Shugart has detailed: the threat of replicating the hegemonic discourse. This is truly a case of the impossibility of tearing down the master’s house using the master’s tools.

Existing irony theory has yet to mount a credible defense against such arguments because existing theories assume a disassociation from the hegemonic discourse, believing a certain distance is necessary. However, Žižek notes that this approach will never be successful for, “a minimum of disidentification is a priori necessary if power is to function ... power can reproduce itself only through some form of self-distance” (Žižek, Butler, and Laclau, 2000, p. 217). When the ironic rhetors attempt to distance themselves from the system they seek to subvert, they only allow the system to speak through them (and replicate the hegemonic discourse). For example, in the corrupt democracies of Eastern Europe’s past, the people would disidentify from the electoral system thinking it to be a joke, where the election was decided before a single ballot was cast. The response was to stay away from the ballot box, knowing that their vote didn’t matter. However, their refusal to vote only allowed the system to maintain control *and* their expressed displeasure became part of the system; it was the grumblings about the system from the masses that allowed the system to rumble forward. Žižek argues that, “one has to abandon the idea that power operates in the mode of identification ... so that the privileged form of resistance to power should involve a politics of disidentification”

(Žizek, Butler, and Laclau, 2000, p. 217). If the ironic rhetor is precluded then from using even his or her own words, the question then becomes what avenues are available for him or her?

For the ironic rhetor, the system that is to be subverted is an ugly beast, rife with ironic statements from the outset. As noted in the previous chapter, it is impossible to ignore the irony of how Pakistan went from being a “terrorist nation” before September 11, 2001, to “one of America’s strongest allies” in the fight against terrorism simply because of its proximity to Afghanistan. Here, because the irony already pre-exists, an ironic rhetor can engage not in the politics of disidentification, but rather one of overidentification, where the rhetor “overidentif[ies] with the explicit power discourse – ignoring this inherent obscene underside and simply taking the power discourse at its (public) word, acting as if it really means what it explicitly says (and promises). [This] can be the most effective way of disturbing its smooth functioning” (Žizek, Butler, and Laclau, 2000, p. 220). For Žizek, the collapse of Yugoslavia was the product of overidentification. Yugoslav self-management socialism relied upon the disidentification of the people. Officially, the state-controlled media decried the public apathy and the government pleaded with the people for them to throw off the shackles of their indifference and embrace self-management. However, “a cynical attitude towards the official ideology was what the regime really wanted – the greatest catastrophe for the regime would have been for its own ideology to be taken seriously, and realized by its subjects” (Žizek, 2001, p. 92). Ultimately, the people of Eastern Europe did take up the mantle of self-management and the fall of socialism in Yugoslavia began.

The politics of overidentification provide the ironic rhetor with all of the benefits of ironic argument detailed thus far, but effectively side-step the problem of replicating

the hegemonic discourse. This overidentification allows the space between the rhetor and subject other to be held open for critical inquiry, for (as discussed earlier in this chapter) it is the disassociation and detachment that forces a collapse of the space.

### Concentric Irony Theory

Existing irony theory fails to account for three primary criticisms: incoherent dismissal, replication of the hegemonic discourse, and the loss of audience agency. Each attempt to answer one of these concerns inevitably raises the specter of another. This chapter will outline a new approach to irony that utilizes Lacanian psychoanalysis to answer each of these claims in turn. Vital to this discussion is the recognition that the ironic rhetor exists in a space separate from traditional argument theory. The ironic rhetor, or more specifically the postmodern subversive ironic rhetor, occupies territory that has yet to be mapped or cultivated and yet is wholly unique. Ironic rhetors exist as an alternate persona, where they forward explicit arguments that are the antithesis of the genuine arguments they hope the reader/hearer will decipher and accept. Failure of the rhetor to recognize one's self as an alternate persona dooms the ironic rhetor before s/he even begins. Absent a consistent alternate persona (consistent both with the ironic utterances and with the mapped ironic space that encompasses the speaker and audience), a consistent and coherent reading is impossible. The alternate persona is the conscious incarnation of a new mirror stage. The ironic rhetor must recognize this alternate persona as distinct from himself or herself as a person; rather than an infant realizing himself or herself as separate from the mother, here the rhetor recognizes the ironic persona as separate from his or her personage. Now a post-Oedipal construction of a new ego is possible where the rhetor may embrace a new value system based on the original Symbolic Order.

Once the alternate persona is carved, there are a multitude of options available to the rhetor that have not yet been articulated. The first is the potential for the pseudo-ironic utterance. The pseudo-ironic utterance is that which is ironic only for the speaker as alternate persona and the audience who perceives that persona. The pseudo-ironic utterance takes the place of Shugart's stable premise in that the pseudo-ironic utterance and stable premise are the same, simultaneously equal and interchangeable, differentiated not by their substance but only by the subject position in relation to the rhetor. The stable premise provides the opportunity for coherent readings, but potentially replicates the dominant discourse only because the rhetor grounds it in the dominant discourse. If, however, the rhetor embraces the alternate persona, then the stable premise transforms into the pseudo-ironic allowing for consistent readings but not falling prey to the replication of the hegemonic discourse. The Symbolic Order that was once the prison of the traditional rhetor becomes the playground of the ironic rhetor in the alternate persona. The Symbolic Order can be reconstituted in such a way as to provide the necessary grounding to prevent "misreads" of the irony, but not run the risk of entrenching the system that the rhetor seeks to subvert. Returning again to the discussion of fantasy, the pseudo-ironic allows the rhetor the luxury of dictating that which the fantasy demands of the reader/hearer without giving him or her the burden of having to (re)articulate the fantasy to the other. Functionally, this creates the space between the others necessary for political efficacy and does not make unrealistic demands on those that enter the dialogue.

From the pseudo-ironic utterances, the rhetor is now able to construct one of many concentric ironies. First-degree concentric ironies are those that are comprised of one or more pseudo-ironies within a larger subversive irony. The first-degree concentric irony roots itself in a stable premise masquerading as a pseudo-ironic utterance. This

action allows the rhetor to set a grounding for everyone to see, regardless of whether they are scholars of postmodern theory. The decision to engage the artifact is only one of many subtextual rhetorical markers within the overarching (external) subversive irony. This puts the onus on the rhetor to provide adequate internal ironic markers, but provides scholarly reprieve to the audience. While the implications for the audience will be discussed in terms of second-degree concentric ironies, these first-degree concentric ironies ensure consistent and coherent readings.

While first-degree concentric ironies allow for the use of the stable premise as a pseudo-ironic utterance (which guarantees consistent and coherent readings), they do not ensure audience agency. Audience agency can be guaranteed only through second-degree concentric ironies. Second-degree concentric ironies are ones that include the audience as active agents in the ironic argument itself and force them to make a decision, which often can come in the form of an implicit or explicit invitation. This invitation creates the “in-group” that “gets” the joke and the “out-group” that then becomes the target of the subversion. Shugart makes reference to audience agency and the need to “get” the joke. She also references the effect on the out-group, though she leaves open the possibility that the audience may remove itself from the discussion. Second-degree concentric ironies do not allow for that contingency. The mere encountering of the ironic utterance forces a decision on the audience: a decision to engage the concentric irony as an active external sphere (adding to the concentricity) or a decision to be engaged by the irony allowing its concentric nature to engulf the audience. Even the attempt to ignore the utterance is a refusal of the extended invitation and a decision to be engaged by the ironic performance.

Lacan’s vision of subjectivity is crucial to an understanding of the function of the

second-degree concentric ironies. First, it is important that the rhetor made the decision to use irony as the vehicle for expression; this decision sets the rhetor in a unique subject space where they will interact with the other (reader/hearer) in an ironic fantasy world of their own creation. This ensures a construction of the Symbolic Order based on the regulations established by the rhetor. The reader/hearer now has the opportunity to reject the invitation for self-reflection offered by the rhetor (creating a subject position outside of the concentricities), or to accept the invitation and make one of many multiple readings on the ironic project. The notion of “multiple readings” does not undermine the earlier claim that readings be consistent and rooted in the pseudo-ironic utterance because multiple readings merely imply that there are different interpretations available, though all along the same directional axis. This creates a situation where the subject exists as a flickering entity defining and redefining themselves inside of the intersecting ironic spheres, constantly (re)negotiating their subject position in relation to the overall ironic project.

This negotiation of the subject position between the rhetor as alternate persona and the reader/hearer as participant in the fantasy provides the necessary bridge to access the Real Order without risking permanent evaporation of the subject. Žižek argues that readings that are exactly the same remove the Symbolic Order and turn humans into automatons, robotic sentries dismantling the bridge to the Real. Different interpretations of a performance are therefore necessary to ensure the presence of the Symbolic, but the subject positioning may allow us glimpses of the Real Order. For example, war is an aspect of the Real, but its relation and justification in the Symbolic Order is divergent depending on the subject position. For America, the “War on Terror” is defended as a necessary action to protect the American homeland. For others, it is a “War of Terror”



and explicated as an excuse for power projection of the American hegemonic elite. Both of these interpretations are constructed from the Symbolic Order, both maintain the humanness of the participants by their ability to construct divergent views and neither denies the Real Order of war. However, neither of these interpretations provide us a glimpse into the Real Order either, for every attempt to grasp the Real is done through signification that makes the Real fleeting, though no less real. An ironic interpretation, however, may allow those who engage the ironic utterance an opportunity to glimpse the Real Order that runs tangential to the Symbolic Order of the irony based on their flickering subject positions. This point will be made explicitly in Chapter 3 when the pro-war rhetoric of GVAR is examined in detail.

#### Summary and Theoretical Model

This chapter has detailed some of the theories of Lacanian psychoanalysis and applied them to a new theory of ironic discourse. First, this chapter looked at the structure of language and noted how a commitment to the Symbolic Order both allows ironic theory to be applicable to linguistic and non-linguistic forms of irony, yet also traps humans into the realm of the Symbolic. Fantasy was examined via the argument that it creates desire, thus limiting the impact of a “misread” on a particular ironic utterance while simultaneously ensuring some level of audience agency. This effectively answers both the “incoherent dismissal” and “loss of agency” problems that face existing irony theory. Audience agency is further explicated in terms of subjectivity where it was noted that the rhetor always speaks in terms of an “other” (be it an unconscious other or a subject other). Further, it was noted that the use of irony is a conscious decision by the rhetor in attempts to grasp self-identity and self-reflexivity that creates an “in-group” of those that “get” the joke (read the irony “correctly”) and an “out-group” of those that do

not (“misread” the irony, or dismiss it entirely). Finally, to answer the questions that inevitably arise from this new approach, Žižek’s concept of overidentification is used to illustrate how the space between the rhetor and the subject other can be kept open for critical inquiry and possible political change. This addresses more complicated concerns of audience agency and the criticism that irony inevitably collapses in on itself rendering ironic argument impotent.

These precepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis were then applied to a new theory of irony, Concentric Irony Theory. Concentric Irony Theory argues that ironies are not static singularities, but rather intersecting spheres of discourse that must be viewed in totality as an overarching performance. First, the rhetor must be identified as existing in a unique subject space as alternate persona. This alternate persona allows the rhetor to engage in overidentification as s/he takes on the most disgusting mimicry of the system that they seek to subvert. From this alternate persona, the rhetor then creates the first of many concentric ironies, called a “first-degree irony” or “pseudo-irony”. The first-degree irony takes the place of Shugart’s stable premise and both ensures a consistent reading (avoiding incoherent dismissal) and sets the stage for a subversive project of overidentification. The “real” argument is made within the first-degree irony though it seems ironic from the subject position of the alternate persona. From here, the ironic rhetor creates any number of intersecting “second-degree” ironies that construct a larger ironic project of overidentification (avoiding the replication of the hegemonic discourse). Within and between these second-degree ironies the subject position of the subject other is negotiated and the decision of whether the reader/hearer will engage the irony (and accept the invitation) or whether the irony will engage him or her (and decline the invitation) is made. The reader/hearer also may exist simultaneously in multiple

contradictory subject positions, which ensures active audience agency.

In the next chapter, the rhetoric of GEAR will be examined utilizing Concentric Irony Theory. To ensure that a sufficiently rigorous test has been applied to the model, a singular theme has been selected on the basis of its ability to evoke emotionally charged responses: the ironic pro-war stance of GEAR.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **GWAR AS A CASE STUDY FOR CONCENTRIC IRONIES**

This thesis has argued that ironies are not static singularities, but rather should be conceived of as dynamic intersecting spheres of performance where both the rhetor and reader/hearer (re)negotiate their subject positions in relation to each other and the performance itself. The rhetor should first recognize and articulate an alternate persona where s/he separates himself or herself and creates a new subject position from which the ironic utterance can take shape. From this alternate persona position, the rhetor then has the freedom to articulate first-degree ironies utilizing the pseudo-ironic utterance that takes the place of the stable premise and is ironic only to the alternate persona. After the first-degree ironies set the rhetorical position of the rhetor s/he has increased freedom in the construction of second-degree ironies that can be critical of an established system without fear of replicating the hegemonic discourse or risking incoherent dismissal. This chapter will use the inflammatory pro-war rhetoric of the performance punk/metal band GWAR as a test case for this conception of ironic utterances.

#### **GWAR as Alternate Persona**

The necessary first step for the ironic rhetor is the recognition that s/he exists in a wholly unique space on the argumentative landscape. GWAR recognizes that their performance (ironic argument) persona is distinct from their persona as people and

embraces the flexibility that this alternate persona allows them. Most obviously, GWAR embraces the alternate persona by literally transforming themselves into different beings, dressing in costumes of their own design and taking on different stage names. Members of GWAR are not credited as “Dave Brockie” or “Michael Derks”, but, rather, as “Oderus Urungus”, “Beefcake the Mighty”, “Jizmak Da Gusha”, “Flattus Maximus” and “Balsac the Jaws of Death”.

Recognition of this alternate persona allows the members of GWAR to take divergent and contradictory subject positions simultaneously. For example, Dave Brockie, who plays the role of GWAR-leader Oderus Urungus, has been very vocal in his hatred of the “art of heritage” (e.g. statues of Robert E. Lee and Andrew Jackson) in his hometown of Richmond, Virginia. He asks, “[w]hy are you so proud of a heritage that kidnapped millions of human beings from their homeland, placed them in perilous bondage, and then proceeded to sell and enslave them?” (Brockie, 2003). He answers his own question, arguing that, “[t]hose are statues to a war you wished you’d won that was waged to keep other people in chains” (Brockie, 2003). While Dave Brockie is critical of art that glorifies slavery and death in his hometown, his alternate persona of Oderus Urungus is clearly in favor of such atrocities. As Oderus Urungus, he claims that his “turn-ons” include “hulking war machines, lurking, public urinals [and] flesh sculpture” and that his personal quote is “[t]hose who trumpet their sufferings are usually most deserving of agony” (“Oderus Urungus”, 2004). Dave Brockie actively protests art that he believes to be oppressive and emblematic of violence while Oderus Urungus actively preaches his desire to enslave the human race.

GWAR also provides rhetorical markers within their grand performance that act as the “wink and a nudge” necessary to let the reader/hearer know that the performance is

intended as ironic. This “wink and a nudge” acts as both a rhetorical marker and an active recognition of their alternate persona. One of the better examples of this recognition is in the song “Gilded Lily” from the 1991 album “America Must Be Destroyed”. GWAR writes,

Well I’ve been wearing a gilded lily  
 Cunningly carved in a manner frilly  
 To my design it was created  
 No deviation was tolerated  
 My gilded lily, he thinks he’s funny  
 My gilded lily, he’s worth cash money  
 My gilded lily, he made me a smarty  
 I wear my lily to all the right parties go  
 I was the envy of all the horde  
 I proclaimed myself overlord  
 My gilded lily gives me all this and more  
 I puke my guts all over the floor (GWAR, 1991).

First, it is important to look at the historical backdrop of the phrase “to gild the lily”. The phrase itself is a truncated metaphor from Shakespeare’s *King John*, “[t]o gild refined gold, to paint the lily ... is wasteful and ridiculous excess” (Shakespeare, 1595/2001, act iv, scene 2). The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines the phrase as “[t]o adorn unnecessarily something already beautiful,” but also notes that there is an archaic meaning of “[t]o smear with blood” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). This is precisely the kind of double-entendre that GWAR likes to utilize in their performance to force their audience to actively engage the artifact they provide. GWAR assumes that the audience is not simply an empty vessel to be filled, but an active participant in the dialogue that will understand their admittedly esoteric references and decipher the multiple levels to their argument. The active engagement by the audience ultimately will ultimately allow them to embrace multiple contradictory subject positions that will allow them access to the Real Order.

Another example of such layered meanings lies in the song title itself, “Guilded Lily”. Here GWAR takes the word “gild” and changes the spelling of “guild”, which, of course, is another word for a contemporary trade union. This seems most certainly to be a conscious decision on their part, and not simply a misspelling, as the word “gild” appears in the lyrics throughout the rest of the song. GWAR then tips their hand as to the intent of the song prior to the first note being played; they consider themselves a union of sorts, conspiring together for a singular (ironic) goal.

Looking at the first verse in the song, it becomes quite clear that GWAR has embraced the alternate persona. The gilded lily itself has become the incarnation of the alternate persona and is manifested physically in the costumes they wear. Their choice (“to my design it was created”), was to create an entertaining ironic persona (“he thinks he’s funny”), and to come together with other like-minded people to form a union (guild) for such performances (“he’s worth cash money”). Further, GWAR recognizes that to merely create an alternate persona is insufficient; the ironic rhetor must carve out a specialized subject space using that alternate persona. Dave Brockie did not just don the mask and give himself a name, he created a back-story and a unique personality for his alternate persona. He “declared [himself] overlord”, leader of the Scumdogs of the Universe, confined to this planet by the Master, intent on enslaving the human race. Alone, this would read like a synopsis to a B-horror film, but set within the theory of irony outlined here, the lily most certainly “made [him] a smarty” as it allowed him to navigate through complex argumentative terrain.

The first verse of the song sets the stage for GWAR to embrace their alternate persona, but the rest of the song continues to mark the space where the overarching ironic argument will be molded. GWAR continues,

I found the entertainment banal so,  
 Through trenches of flesh we carved a canal  
 Lead harlequin then drew his last  
 He held a bejeweled theatrical mask  
 The door heaved and then exploded  
 We split the bill and then drove home loaded  
 When we got there the paint was peeling  
 We throw the Jell-O cubes to the ceiling  
 I wear the lily  
 Gaily festooned in a manner silly  
 Draped in apparel  
 I bathe in the smell  
 I gild the lily  
 Adroitly crafted yet willy nilly  
 I wear the lily  
 When I party with Milli Vanilli (GWAR, 1991).

Here GWAR provides additional rationalization for their decision to establish an alternate persona. When this song was released in 1991, the grunge explosion was just beginning, but the airwaves were still dominated by either bland hip-hop or rapidly aging metal bands like Guns 'N Roses. This is the banal entertainment that GWAR was responding to, carving their niche out of the living flesh and “theatrical mask” that would become their alternate persona. Interestingly, the reference to Milli Vanilli in the last line of the verse sets up the scenario for the final verse of the song. Milli Vanilli was the epitome of the bland and unthreatening hip-hop that radio stations of the age coveted, though they were ultimately mired in controversy when it was discovered that they didn’t actually perform any of their own songs. Milli Vanilli was not only representative of the state of the music industry that GWAR was an answer to, but a different representation of the artistic endeavor of which GWAR was also a part, for Milli Vanilli was as much an alternate persona as Oderus Urungus is for Dave Brockie. The difference, of course, was that the alternate persona created by GWAR was for the purpose of constructing an ironic utterance, while the Milli Vanilli travesty was an unintended ironic performance of the



music industry.

The final verse of the song laments on the inherent instability of subjectivity as articulated by Lacan. GWAR concludes with,

And soon the pleasure barges  
 Rolled with the sun, pleasantly bloated  
 We mingled as one amidst debris of  
 Debauchery, I looked for the lily and  
 Just found me  
 And all the while the gilded lily faded  
 Though it was the best I created  
 But gilded lily was still in place  
 It made a mockery of my face  
 And delivered us a surprise  
 The hulking mass of what we despised  
 We lurched away as we moved to snuff it  
 And we delivered a princely buffet  
 Soon the continent split all asunder  
 And the radios blared to the blunder  
 My gilded lily expanded while spinning  
 That's when I found out that we were winning  
 Fondly clutching our raging piss-ons  
 We piled up, peeled out, veered off, blast off  
 And then we were gone (GWAR, 1991).

GWAR notes the danger of the subject permanently evaporating by merging too closely with their alternate persona. The “debris of debauchery” referenced here can just as easily be the depravity of GWAR as it can the wickedness that can accompany a band while touring. GWAR searched for the lily (the alternate persona), but found only themselves in its place “mocking” what they had become. While criticizing the political void of music at the time, the danger existed for GWAR to lose themselves in the criticism, become the lily that they gilded, and be functionally as irrelevant as that which they were indicting. GWAR was becoming “the hulking mass of what [they] despised”, but were conscious of the danger and, in response, they “lurched away as [they] moved to snuff it”. This movement away gave GWAR sufficient space to avoid being consumed

by their creation. Even as the lily “expanded” to chase them as they separated themselves, their removal from it was the evidence they needed to know that they “were winning” the battle.

The last line of the song, “and then we were gone”, is open to multiple interpretations; either they were victims of the permanent evaporation that Lacan warned against, or they had created enough separation from the alternate persona that their survival was guaranteed. This is the first test of Concentric Irony Theory: can the alternate persona allow the rhetor to become intimately connected to the alternate persona that they have created and avoid permanent evaporation and a collapse of the space necessary for critical inquiry? Staying within the context of the song, the answer is clearly “yes”. Milli Vanilli, who arguably had an alternate persona of their own, faded quickly and permanently after their lip-synching escapades were discovered. GWAR, conversely, has grown in popularity since 1991 and is still a force in the musical industry. The question then is, what is the difference between GWAR and Milli Vanilli in terms of alternate persona? The primary difference is that the alternate persona requires a public recognition of that alternate persona by the artist. Milli Vanilli masqueraded as doing the performances themselves, while GWAR makes the public recognition that they are performers playing a role (the song itself is a public recognition). Embracing the public acknowledgement of the alternate persona allows the rhetor to enjoy the luxury of the subject position, but simultaneously allows them fair distance from it so that they did not suffer a permanent evaporation of their subject position from within the project.

GWAR was able to effectively carve out an alternate persona from which they can now make ironic arguments. The next sections will examine the first and second-degree ironies created by GWAR in singular songs. However, it has been the contention

of this thesis throughout that ironies are not static singularities. That being said, the last section will look at the ironies as they intersect with the alternate persona established here and determine if they can provide us access to the Real Order.

### First-degree Ironies of GWAR's Pro-war Rhetoric

First-degree ironies utilize the pseudo-ironic utterance in place of the stable premise to provide rhetorical markers to the reader-hearer without risk of replicating the hegemonic discourse. The stable premise ensures consistent readings from the audience because they make reference to social positions with which everyone can identify. Unfortunately, these social positions are often consistent with a system that the rhetor seeks to subvert, and forcing the reader/hearer to engage the artifact from a point of entry consistent with the system risks the ironic argument losing its force in the face of the system. The pseudo-ironic utterance serves the same function as the stable premise, but because it is contextualized against the alternate persona, it asks the reader/hearer to engage the artifact from a point of entry that stands in opposition to the system. For the rhetor, the stable premise *is* an ironic utterance. For example, in "Happy Death Day", GWAR writes,

Happy anniversary, schools are short of funds  
 This is what I say, give the kids more guns  
 All of the classes are on how to kill  
 If you don't teach them then someone else will (GWAR, 2002).

The line "schools are short of funds" is the pseudo-ironic utterance. Assume for a moment that this ironic utterance was from Dave Brockie and not Oderus Urungus. The line, "schools are short of funds" would be a stable premise in that everyone could agree that an educational system that lacks funds and support is one that is dangerous for the future of the country. If taken as a stable premise, then the next three lines would be the

ironic utterance. The ironic utterance argues that because the schools are the training grounds for future citizens of the bloodlust society, we should encourage the teaching of violence and even provide them with the tools. However, the first line of the argument (the stable premise) bemoaned the under-funded and under-appreciated nature of the school system and established sympathy in the reader/hearer for the educational system. The mindset of the reader/hearer is now one where they feel sorry for the schools and any ironic argument that follows will only seem like an unfair “low blow” at a hamstrung system that does the best it can with the means afforded it. Because the stable premise created a feeling of sympathy for the educational system, the likelihood of the ironic argument being dismissed as heartless grows. This is an example of how the stable premise runs the risk of replicating the hegemonic discourse.

Now assume that the ironic utterance comes from Oderus Urungus and not Dave Brockie. For Oderus Urungus, the fact that the schools are short on funds would be a good thing, for wouldn't a creature who thrives on the torture and despair of others also take joy in children being uneducated? From within the alternate persona, it is the stable premise that is ironic in relation to the assigned subject position of the rhetor. The reader/hearer is still able to identify the rhetorical marker as provided, but recognizes that the rhetor as alternate persona finds it entertaining. This then allows the reader/hearer to hear out the remainder of the ironic utterance without risk of unconsciously replicating the hegemonic discourse.

There are multiple instances of pseudo-ironic utterances in the pro-war rhetoric of GWAR. This thesis will not attempt to outline every case of the pseudo-ironic, but provide ample examples to illustrate the usefulness of the model. In the song “Whargoul”, GWAR writes,

I destroyed your life, I raped your wife  
 I am Whargoul, I am uncool, I am Whargoul  
 I've been many faces, been many names  
 Known love and hate until they were the same (GWAR, 1996).

Here the pseudo-ironic utterance is more subtle, wrapped in rhetoric that would turn the stomachs of most. It is simply the line, "I am uncool" because, for GWAR the destruction of life and rape are things to be glorified. In the world of GWAR, there is nothing more "cool" than the suffering of others. In the "Insidious Soliloquy of Skulhedface", GWAR writes,

Words that healed. Legends that have taught  
 Oral traditions both fought for and lost  
 Secrets of success. Shouts filled with hate  
 Documents declaring freedoms of state (GWAR, 1994).

This pseudo-ironic utterance is more difficult to identify, as it is not a single clear line to which one can point. Here, the pseudo-ironic utterance is more sub-textual, but still serves the same function. Much like the example in "Whargoul", there is a line wrapped in divergent rhetoric; in "Insidious Soliloquy of Skulhedface", however, it is the pseudo-ironic that wraps around the truly ironic. The pseudo-ironic utterance here is that language leaves a legacy of knowledge for subsequent generations and serves a healing function for humanity. The truly ironic is the line "shouts filled with hate" and, arguably, the next line "documents declaring freedoms of state". Reminiscent of the earlier Lacan discussion, GWAR notes that language has the ability to be both liberating and a prison, to do both harm and good for humanity. Language can both be the oral traditions that allow humanity to build from the experiences and advances of previous generations and simultaneously give us the justification for increasing levels of violence against one another.

GWAR establishes an alternate persona, which allows them to create multiple

pseudo-ironic utterances that act as a grounding mechanism similar to the stable premise, but without the danger of replicating the hegemonic discourse. This is the first example of how ironic performances cannot be viewed singly, but rather as intersecting spheres where one decision of the performance has profound effects on the others. Now that several first-degree ironies have been identified, it is possible to look at the more complicated second-degree ironies to understand the overarching ironic argument that GEAR makes with their pro-war rhetoric.

### Second-degree Ironies of GEAR's Pro-war Rhetoric

Second-degree ironies begin by addressing the question of audience agency by making the reader/hearer active participants in the irony. In second-degree ironies the alternate persona of the rhetor extends an invitation to the reader/hearer and allows him or her a choice to either accept or decline the invitation. An acceptance of the invitation is an active decision by the reader/hearer to engage the utterance and become a willing participant in the irony. A declination of the invitation, likewise, is an active choice by the reader/hearer, and may seem, at first glance, to short-circuit the efficacy of the ironic argument. While it should be clear that the extended invitation preserves audience agency regardless of the decision made by the reader/hearer, it is important to understand that a declination of the invitation does not gut the ironic performance.

Declining the invitation places the subject position of the reader/hearer outside the concentric irony created by the second-degree irony. The exact subject positioning, defined by the reader/hearer's position to the alternate persona (whether or not the reader/hearer recognizes the alternate persona and accepts that the utterance is ironic) is ultimately irrelevant for the current discussion, but will be addressed in the final section of this chapter as a necessary building block for the bridge to the Real Order. A

declination of the invitation places the reader/hearer outside of the second-degree irony, but does not remove him or her from the performance. Shugart noted the need for an in-group and an out-group for ironic functions; here declination is an acceptable decision for it creates a subject position outside of the second-degree concentric performance, but firmly inside of the overarching concentric performance. Merely encountering the invitation makes the reader/hearer a participant in the performance where declination is the manufacturing of an out-group against which the overidentification of the alternate persona can be juxtaposed.

Examples of extended invitations are ubiquitous in GWAR's performance. In 2004, GWAR created a new political party, the War Party, and established the Krosstika (a mix of the Cross and the Swastika) as the emblem of their political party. They write,

What's that symbol above the oven?  
 Beaming its malice to all that we shove in  
 In the War Party we take every side  
 United as one until everyone dies  
 Symbol of hatred, symbol of fear  
 The Krosstika proclaims our cause ...  
 Let now the symbol define you  
 With a wave of raw hate  
 The Krosstika takes  
 The symbol is there to remind you (GWAR, *War Party*, 2004).

As Lacan argues that humans have become slaves to our symbols, so GWAR consolidates their ironic political aspirations into a singular symbol of blood, hate and violence. In this case, GWAR extends an explicit invitation to the reader/hearer, imploring the reader/hearer several times throughout the performance to "answer the Krosstika's call" (GWAR, *War Party*, 2004). A decision to fly the Krosstika is to accept the invitation extended by GWAR and take a subject position inside the second-degree irony. In "War Party", GWAR asks that we "come join the War Party" (GWAR, *War*

*Party*, 2004). Again, this is an invitation that can be accepted or declined creating different subject positions, but it maintains audience agency regardless of the decision.

The invitations extended by GVAR are not always explicit, but often implied.

Returning to “Happy Death Day”, GVAR writes,

Happy Death Day to Columbine  
Let's make the world an Oklahoma City, fine!  
Wacky Waco, happy death day  
The babies that were burned  
The wheel has turned (GVAR, 2002).

GVAR is critical of the hollowness of anniversaries and memorials in contemporary American society. For many, Memorial Day is not a day to remember the soldiers who died in battle, but a 3-day mattress sale and an excuse to barbeque at the lake. In response, GVAR overidentifies with the prevailing attitude of the country and consolidates all of the death and destruction that permeates American society into a singular holiday (Death Day) and invites the country to the annual GVAR-B-Q for a celebration. The invitation is not explicit, as in the above examples, but contingent upon the reader/hearer deciphering the rhetorical clues. While these implicit invitations do meet the minimal criteria of an extended invitation (necessary to maintain audience agency), they do require the reader/hearer to understand and accept the irony and the alternate persona subject position of the rhetor. Functionally, this means that those who are able to correctly decipher the implicit invitation are those that are most likely to accept the invitation; thus, an explicit invitation is preferable to ensure audience agency.

Just as the extended invitation serves a necessary function for the overall ironic performance, the ironic utterances and rhetorical markers set within are vital to a “correct” mapping of the overarching performance. The remainder of this section will examine the pro-war rhetoric of GVAR more closely and fill in the details of the ironic



cartography. Laying the foundation is the song “Americanized” from GWAR’s first album, “Hell-O!” GWAR sets their sites on the hypocrisy of American culture early and lays the groundwork for their later criticism. They write,

I’m Americanized  
 9 tons of crack a day  
 I’m Americanized  
 It’s up my butt, the USA  
 I’m Americanized  
 All you people will look like us  
 I’m Americanized  
 You worship me, but still you suck ...  
 I’m Americanized  
 Your world is full of hate and filth ...  
 Drugs and guns, drugs and guns  
 C’mon man, let’s go kill someone (GWAR, 1988).

GWAR establishes early their criticism of the hypermasculine obsession with violence that permeates American culture. American culture is funneled into two primary physical manifestations, “drugs and guns”. While this is most certainly an oversimplification, a closer inspection of the numbers reveals that this is not as bizarre as one might initially think. According to a study conducted by the National Institute on Drug Abuse during the same year as this song was recorded, 21 million Americans used cocaine, an estimated 80 percent of all Americans drank alcohol and over 90 million Americans experimented with illegal drugs (Buckley, 1990). Further, in 1991, the population of the United States was 252 million while there were 211 million privately owned guns (*A Pro Gun Control Philosophy*, 1995). Similarly, a 1999 Gallop poll revealed that 86% of all American men have reported firing a gun in their lives (*Gun Ownership*, 2001). Certainly, all Americans are not experimenting with illegal drugs and firing weapons, but the numbers do illustrate that Americans are above the global par on both counts.

The conclusion that GWAR draws from this nationwide obsession is that we

should “go kill someone”. Again, while not all Americans come to the same conclusion, the National Institute of Justice writes that, “[g]reater gun availability increases the rates of murder and felony gun use” (Roth, 1994). GWAR’s argument is not factually true, but, rather, hyperbole rooted in facts that many of us wish were untrue. American society has a problem with drug abuse and gun violence, a fact that GWAR establishes early in their career to set the foundation for their overarching ironic war argument. On the *This Toilet Earth* album in 1994, GWAR makes this connection more explicit. In the song, “The Obliteration of Flab Quarv 7”, GWAR writes,

You know, back in outer space, we used to drink – a lot  
We used to take all kinds of kick ass drugs  
And showed blatant disrespect for any authority figures  
Little did we know we were undermining our entire value system (GWAR, 1994).

Drugs and alcohol set the stage for debauchery and the ultimate ironic end to the song. The song tells the story of a drunken band of warriors dispatched to massacre an enemy planet (Flab Quarv 7), but, because of their inebriation, they accidentally attacked and destroyed the wrong planet. In “Americanized”, GWAR asks American society to question how far removed they are from similarly undermining their value system.

After “Americanized”, GWAR begins to explore the psychology of war. In “Whargoul”, they write,

I’m the fucking Whargoul, I’m the ghost of Minas Morgul ...  
I bring ruin, I am Whargoul, am I human?  
They think that they know what I know  
They think they know what’s best  
I think that’s why they killed me, that’s why I joined the SS  
In revenge for Malmedy, they used a blowtorch on me  
Nice try, Whargoul cannot die, cannot will not die  
You blow off my arm I laugh at the pain  
And after the battle I feast on the slain  
Seeking my creator, taking from the strong  
Yes, you see I need your strength, so I can kill the wrong

Seeking my creator, taking from the weak  
 Yes, you see I need you, so I can snuff the meek  
 Savor the silence—Whargoul  
 Addicted to violence ...  
 I don't care what flag that I choose, I don't care if I win or lose  
 I don't care if you have to die, just fight without a side, never say die! ...  
 And once again, I died alive, sent home in a box but somehow I survived  
 Maybe you've got my face, I'm the demon of war (GWAR, 1996).

“Whargoul” is GWAR’s examination of the cycle of war and utilizes rhetorical markers that are emblematic of the best ironic utterances, forcing the reader/hearer to actively engage the artifact in an effort to decipher its meaning. The reader/hearer must bring a certain literary and historical knowledge to the table in an effort to decode the utterance, and it is that knowledge that makes the decoding rewarding in a way that irony exploits best. Minas Morgul is the city of the Ring-Wraiths in Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings* books and the massacre at Malmedy is one of the more famous tragedies of war.

The Whargoul is a demon released upon the planet and responsible for war and inhumanity. Of course, the Whargoul is a metaphor for human nature corrupted by a never ending quest for power where the “demon of war” is released upon the planet by the humans that birthed it. GWAR asks early in the song if the Whargoul is human, answering the question in a very unsatisfying way. They note that humans think that they understand the nature of war and the political ramifications of organized violence, giving them the power to control or “kill” the Whargoul. World War I was commonly referred to as the “war to end all wars”, which theoretically killed the Whargoul (or, at minimum, kept it under the control of human whims). However, the political fallout of World War I gave rise to World War II, where the Whargoul joined the SS and culminated in the violence of Nazi Germany against the Jewish population of Western Europe and the war crimes of Malmedy. Naturally, such violence breeds the need for revenge, where the

Allied troops used one of the more brutal hand weapons, the flamethrower, to burn the face from war. Though it is the abhorrent brutality of the Nazis and the “justified” violence of the Allied forces that breeds more violence and devastation, the Whargoul needs no cause, no flag, no side to commit atrocities. Whargoul needs only the desire for power and control to subject its victims to the horror of war.

Moving away from the textual explanations of war available in “Whargoul”, examination of the literary and historical references reveals a great deal about the argument that GWAR is constructing. The Ring-Wraiths in the *Lord of the Rings* are humans that have become so obsessed with the power of the One Ring that they have literally sacrificed their humanity in an attempt to find ultimate power and control. For GWAR, the Whargoul is the bastard offspring of these Wraiths, a power-obsessed specter who cares only that humans utilize violence to construct or maintain control that is ever fleeting. War is the terminal result of failed diplomacy, where one side is unable to convince the other to take one or more political actions (often to control their population or themselves), so they resort to violence to enforce that control. At Malmedy, that desire for control manifested itself again as violence as Nazi troops gunned down Allied prisoners of war. Shocked that the Nazis would deviate from the “civilized” nature of war, the Allied forces used Malmedy as a rallying cry to illustrate the need to control the Nazis. Ultimately, however, all war is a product of the human desire for control, a faceless, ghostlike desire that is often overlooked in discussions of large-scale violence.

These songs serve as the beginning to being able to evaluate GWAR’s second-degree ironies as intersecting spheres inside of a singular performance. The “real” argument takes shape within these second-degree ironies. First, it is important to recognize that GWAR assumes that the reader/hearer will bring more than an empty head

to the dialogue and presupposes a certain literary, political and historical literacy of the audience. These unspoken, but certainly existent, assumptions by the rhetor mark off certain spaces as potential subject positions that can be activated by the reader/hearer to become the “subject other” of the performance

GWAR takes the notion of control as the fulcrum for war one step further in “The Insidious Soliloquy of Skulhedface”. Skulhedface was the queen matriarch of a peaceful vegetarian planet before her world was invaded by the warriors of Cardinal Syn. She was then mutated into Skulhedface and sent to Earth to subjugate the population and prepare for Cardinal Syn’s invasion. For centuries, Skulhedface prompted wars among the human population to jump-start the military war-machine and promote technological development to prepare earth for Cardinal Syn’s arrival and domination. While on Earth, Skulhedface harvested Jizmoglobin (an addictive hormone-drug that brings the ultimate in power) from the population to save for Syn’s arrival. Skulhedface, however, decides that she is a better despot than Syn and becomes addicted to the power that Jizmoglobin provides in an attempt to become the ultimate tyrant. GWAR writes,

I am he who has been him back when man  
 Swam Pangean seas as aquatic apes  
 I am he who has been her as she once  
 Bled the world with the words of psychotic fate...  
 Undying research has given to death, rebirth  
 The tools of uber science to fight  
 Most faceless enemies  
 Who do you think you’re up against?  
 Some chaotic stupidity  
 I’ll show you conflict management  
 With my extensive Supergeniosity ...  
 I bleed humanity’s figurines of history  
 I weave travesties tapestries of infamy  
 But I can’t deny it always as such  
 Oh no, nada, nein, non, nyet, nix, not!  
 Pathetically beautiful I was once then  
 Ruled peaceful planets, sublime, before Syn

It's so easy to not see  
 The obvious enemies  
 To put your problems on  
 I've been sick of it all along  
 Now the ultimate morph into  
 Powers that will dwarf  
 The sum of every nation  
 And all known information  
 If you can't stand it the way I have planned it  
 I'll export you off the Earth, sell ya for all your worth  
 Then your enemy will have a face - traitor of the whole human race  
 As you're shipped off to the innermost reaches of outer space (GWAR,  
 1994).

GWAR begins with an exploration of the hypermasculinity of war. The first four lines conflate gender, changing he/him to she/her and then using them interchangeably. This is interesting in terms of the story line of Skulhedface. Skulhedface begins her life as a female before being mutated into a male form by Cardinal Syn. As a male, subjugated by both Cardinal Syn and the desire for power, Skulhedface finds that it is a hormone (Jizmoglobin) that drives masculine power-hungry behavior. At the end of her life Skulhedface overdoses on Jizmoglobin to attain the perfect form and returns to a female form before being murdered by GWAR, the epitome of hypermasculinity.

GWAR then returns to the motif of war as control. Skulhedface believes that scientific military research will provide her the tools for control of the human race. She argues that the tools of science will allow her to "fight most faceless enemies" and is the lynchpin to "conflict management", harkening back to the days of Mutually Assured Destruction where it was the presence of weapons and the ability to destroy the planet that preserved peace. Interestingly, the weapons of destruction that science created are held to fight the "faceless" (read imaginary) enemies. She then uses a variety of languages to say the word "no," indicating that the infamy of violence is cross-cultural and that control and violence is more an inherent product of humanity than a cultural

construct. As a solution, Skulhedface promises to betray the human race and provide a face to their fears by becoming the ultimate despot. Throughout history, humans have recycled fear and morphed faceless enemies into tangible representations that are easily digestible by the population, whether it is the “Uncle Sam” figures burned in effigy at anti-American protests (emblematic of whatever Western leader was in power at the time) or claiming that Saddam Hussein was the new Hitler by George Bush (son and father inclusive). Skulhedface promises humanity reprieve from this cycle by creating herself as the ultimate enemy, the final historical morph, into which the human race can consolidate all of their fears. Of course, this promise is derived from a Jizmoglobin-induced desire for power and control. For GWAR, war is both a product of, and a tool to maintain, control. The ironic message here lies in the exalted place that war and power hold. GWAR both glorifies and embodies violence and control in an effort to overidentify with the system and break it down.

GWAR’s glorification of intergalactic violence is an example of both the construction of a Lacanian fantasm and overidentification from within their second-degree ironies. Clearly, for the audience to play a substantial role in the intergalactic fantasy of Skulhedface and Cardinal Syn, they will have to use their imaginations to both construct the fantasy world and to push through with the recognition of the hypocritical analogies to existing American foreign policy. For how different is Skulhedface’s actions to prompt war on Earth (jump-starting humanity’s technological development) and the United States’ economic “development” packages to Southeast Asia in the 1950’s (necessitating the ultimate American involvement in Vietnam)? GWAR’s glorification of the terminal violence in these stories overidentifies with a system that comes to the same terminal conclusions as the fantasms.

In “Back to Iraq”, GVAR looks at the hypocrisy of war noting that the behaviors that are granted medals overseas are not allowed in “civilized” society. They write,

We were part of the slaughter they called Desert Storm  
 We maimed and we murdered  
 In the name of “Norm”  
 Now as a civilian and purpose I lack  
 I’m getting ready to go back to Iraq!  
 You’re over there while I’m over here  
 We had lasagna and plenty of beer  
 Learning the tools and the tricks of the trade  
 Then I come home and I can’t get laid  
 Back to Iraq!  
 You taught me how to kill  
 You pumped me full of drugs  
 How can you wonder  
 Why I became a thug?  
 Raining death on people  
 Firing into crowds  
 Over there I got a big bright medal  
 But here it’s not allowed (GVAR, 1997).

Moving now to a criticism of an actual and specific war (as opposed to the mythical or general war comments earlier) GVAR begins to make their arguments more concrete. Depicting the anchorless feeling of soldiers returning from Operation Desert Storm, “Back to Iraq” illuminates some of the horrors of war that are often obfuscated by media representations of war. The soldier in the song “learn[ed] the tools and tricks of the trade”, but mourns the fact that he “can’t get laid” when he returns home. Clearly the “tricks of the trade” he learned in Iraq was the use of rape as a weapon during wartime. It is critical in times of war that the soldiers dehumanize the enemy so that the annihilation of entire populations is not a genocidal act, but rather an act of cleansing of a disease that harms a nation. Rape is thus a ubiquitous tool of dehumanization and control during war. Further, GVAR discusses the desensitization techniques used by military forces to mold their soldiers into more efficient killing machines. The military teaches its soldiers how



to kill and rewards such actions with accolades and medals, glorifying violence as the ultimate in bravery. However, returning home, this violence is illegal; the society sections out violent actions as ones that can be carried out against the inhuman enemy, but not the civilized population of the home country. “Back to Iraq” lacks much of the subtleties of the previous performances, but does begin to shed light on the hypocritical positions of the government and military in their quest for control during times of war.

GWAR’s move to discussions of “real” and “actual” conflicts serves an additional function in terms of the second-degree ironies. The fantasms outlined earlier required the reader/hearer to construct a “memory” through imagination. While the “memory” of “Back to Iraq” is no more real than the “memory” of “The Insidious Soliloquy of Skulhedface,” its foundation in a war that can be more efficiently symbolized eases the “memory” transition to mythical battles. Ironic utterances that detail clearly mythical conflicts as they intersect with ironic utterances that detail wars of actuality renders the memory construction for the overall fantasm easier for the audience.

GWAR takes its criticism of actual war events further in their 2004 album *War Party*. Turning their attention to the latest action in Iraq and the “War On Terror”, GWAR becomes more critical of not only the thinly veiled excuses for military action but of the soldiers themselves. In “You Can’t Kill Terror”, GWAR writes,

You can destroy an army, you can kill a man  
 But you can’t kill terror, and terror is what I am  
 Terror’s your servant as you struggle to rule  
 How can you kill terror when you use it as a tool  
 So when you write the history books remember to omit it  
 The sickest thing about your race is that you won’t admit it ...  
 Madness and reason we at once combine  
 This is a war that can last for all time  
 The War Against Terror, sublime ...  
 To give a war a name is just a way for you to mark your time (GWAR,  
*War Party*, 2004).

As noted earlier, dehumanization of the enemy is a part of war and that dehumanization is accomplished through the use of terror. GVAR notes that terror is a tool used by those struggling to maintain control, whether it be the terror of threatened violence or the terror of a mandated prison sentence. Terror is utilized by the state as a means of control, but terror is also a linguistic term open to manipulation by those that have the power to control. GVAR recognizes the malleable nature of “terror,” arguing that those with the control over the history books will (re)interpret “terror.” Therefore, it is a tool only of the enemy, but never of the state in attempts to rule its population.

It has been said that history is written by the colonizers. Taking a deeper look at the ability of the state to (re)historicize its place in the history books, GVAR opens a more esoteric discussion of war, control and mortality. As noted in “The Insidious Soliloquy of Skulhedface,” humanity creates faceless enemies that allow a cycle of violence and war where different enemies can be filled in for the new face of the enemy. Now, however, the state constructed an undying faceless enemy that serves the same function, but doesn’t even need to have a face, for terror is truly faceless. The state can cycle Osama Bin Laden’s face into the “terror slot” and invade Afghanistan, then cycle Saddam Hussein’s face into the “terror slot” and invade Iraq, then cycle out the tangible face and let the faceless specter of “terror” fill its self-referent slot and strip away domestic civil liberties with The Patriot Act. Further, this faceless enemy is one that can truly “last for all time,” giving the state an endless supply of enemies and excuses for them to exert control.

Adding a new dimension to the discussion, however, is the question of mortality. Regardless of how desperately we try to extend our lives, all humans are mortal and it is

the recognition of that mortality that denies us the control that we seek. GWAR takes the question of war as control one step further and asks if the control we exert over others' mortality (the ability to have them live or die at our whim) returns a feeling of control over our own mortality. Further, GWAR notes that our recognition of our inevitable demise forces those obsessed with control to look not for literal immortality, but an immortality through a legacy in the history books, to name the war of control waged against terror to mark their time in history and preserving their name, making them transcendent of their flesh-bound time and place and granting to them the ultimate in control by cheating death.

GWAR continues their project of overidentification in this second-degree irony as they attempt to set their own place in history and accept the role that they criticize the state for playing. These recorded artistic expressions that require the participation of a reader/hearer are a similar attempt at mortality, carving out their own section and writing of history. Additionally, their (re)writing of the history books resets the national memory that further cultivates the memory of the fantasm necessary for the rhetor and reader/hearer to move together towards subject singularity.

In the song "War Party", GWAR narrows their criticism from the actions of the state to the soldiers themselves and demands an explanation for their use of terror during war. They write,

I hear your piteous shrieking in this land of death  
 And boils and bees and RPG's  
 And piles of prisoners masturbated on  
 Now you are on fire  
 You curse the choice you made  
 Your Humvee is a pyre your life to expire  
 Your face and a name and a corpse that's bathed in flames ...  
 Still you expect pity  
 And you shall receive none

Why did death come hard for you?  
 You gave it to some  
 You joined the War Party  
 Your purpose was clear  
 You did your job with skill – you raped and you killed  
 Why so surprised that you finally got billed?  
 You put the gun to your shoulder  
 You put lead through a brain  
 You left bodies to molder  
 You spread havoc and pain  
 They will call you a hero  
 I call you an ignorant slave  
 Because before you died you acted surprise  
 So soon you were shown to your grave...  
 All men die, so don't ask why  
 What the fuck else did you think you were for?  
 You were made to decay, it's better that way (GWAR, *War Party*, 2004).

With references to specific atrocities, such as the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and more general brutalities, and returning again to the use of rape as a weapon, GWAR damns not only the military that glorifies murder through the use of medals, but the entire system that dehumanizes the enemy. Here, the soldier is depicted as both subjugator and subjugated, perpetuating death and brutality while simultaneously being a slave to the system of control. Rather than asking for sympathy, as they had in “Back to Iraq”, however, GWAR demands that we condemn the complicity of the soldiers. The change in tone from 1997’s “Back to Iraq” to 2004’s “War Party” is not surprising as more and more myths are pulled away from the actions of troops during conflict. Pictures pouring in from Iraq of American soldiers humiliating prisoners and civilians continues to shed light on the reality of war. While dehumanization of the enemy is a necessary prerequisite for an effective army, military actions historically have hidden behind the shroud of nobility, a shroud that is quickly being pulled away as the horrors of battle are illuminated. As the shroud is pulled away, the reality of war as a means to control mortality becomes more and more clear. Near the end of the song, GWAR recognizes

the mortality of all humans and the futility of attempts to change or control the inevitable.

The above examples have illustrated that it is possible to engage in ironic argument without falling prey to the criticisms of existing irony theory. By recognizing and articulating an alternate persona, GVAR is able to engage in pseudo-ironic utterances, creating a stable premise for the reader/hearer to avoid incoherent dismissal while not risking the replication of the hegemonic discourse. Further, GVAR's extended invitations ensure audience agency by allowing the reader/hearer to choose their subject position in relation to the ironic performance. These invitations also allow the overall ironic project to resist damning alterations by the reader/hearer choice because the invitation allows the reader/hearer to either engage the artifact or have the artifact's concentric nature engage him or her. From these alternate persona subject positions, ironic rhetors now have the opportunity to create second-degree ironic arguments that, when viewed in totality, can deconstruct a corrupt system and fill in alternate visions.

While this thesis has attempted to construct a theory that answers the primary questions directed at existing irony theory, one residual question remains: so what? Criticisms of ironic arguments, while admittedly questioning whether an effective irony can be constructed, really ask for a defense of irony as an argument form itself. Even if Concentric Irony Theory can illustrate that GVAR is able to effectively construct an ironic performance and side step the primary criticisms of ironic argument, what is the point of engaging in irony to begin with? This thesis has argued that ironies are not static singularities, but rather intersecting performances that build upon and within one another to create a concentric map on the argumentative landscape. To this point, however, each of the ironic performances has been discussed in a vacuum, looking at them as singularities. The final section of this chapter will answer the "so what" question by

taking the ironic singularities outlined above and illustrate how their intersections into an overarching performance provide us with a bridge to the Real Order.

### The Rhetoric of GVAR as a Bridge to the Real Order

It is vital that one not confuse the Real with reality, for the two terms are not interchangeable. The Symbolic Order is what we often perceive as “reality” for it is within the Symbolic Order that we live and construct meaning for our lives. Simply defined, the Real Order is everything that cannot exist in the Symbolic Order; the Real is that which is unsymbolizable, where the signifying chains break down and the limitations of our language systems become apparent. This does not, however, mean that the Real Order is inconsequential; the Real is real, but not reality. Regardless of our inability to name the Real, it does have an impact on our lives. This section will first outline the importance of access to the Real Order of war and then explain how the rhetoric of GVAR provides us glimpses into that Real Order.

Since humans find themselves confined by language and perceive reality through the Symbolic Order, it is not surprising that war is conceived of in symbolic terms. The title of Leo Tolstoy’s classic novel sets the stage for humans’ dichotomous approach to “War and Peace”. War is the absence of peace and peace is the absence of war, each referencing back only to the absence of the other in a never-ending signifying cycle. However, it is the signification of war in both that normalizes the behavior and demands the Symbolic Order to identify the presence or absence of violence. What is war? War is the presence of violence. What, then, is peace? Peace is the absence of violence. This section argues that when war is conceived of only in the Symbolic Order, violence is normalized and becomes an inevitable product of human behavior and an escalating cycle that holds the potential for the ultimate in the “presence of violence” risking the

extermination of all life on the planet. Rather than confine our conception of war to the Symbolic, we must recognize that war is as much a part of the Real Order and we must seek access to the Real Order of war (however brief our glimpses may be).

Articulating the Real Order of war is impossible, for as soon as attempts are made to use language, it becomes a product of the Symbolic Order and it is impossible for the Real to ever be articulated through the Symbolic. Because humans define themselves through the Symbolic, it is understandably frustrating to be unable to signify the Real and that frustration risks dismissing the Real as unimportant. The view that the Real Order is unimportant, however, is myopic at best, and dangerous at worst. Just because the Real resists signification does not mean that the Real is not significant. Humans can never have full access to the Real Order because even access to it on the unconscious level ultimately becomes a part of the Symbolic Order when the unconscious is structured like language. Glimpses to the Real Order are possible, though, and have tangible effects on the way we construct the Symbolic and the way in which reality becomes manifest.

Rather than be frustrated by our inability to explain the Real Order of war in symbolic terms, we should embrace our limitations and be liberated by them. We must accept the Real for what it is, that which definitionally resists signification, and learn from it. There exists a certain freedom in not having to explain what something “means”, not having to negotiate the meanings of words, and not having to interpret expressed arguments. There exists a certain freedom in looking at the gaps in performances, looking at what is unsaid, and letting the unspoken build a bridge to the Real Order that gives us fleeting glimpses to the Real Order of war and allows that which is unarticulated shape our conscious language and the “reality” of the Symbolic Order.

GWAR begins their construction of the bridge to the Real by demanding a

flickering subjectivity of their audience. In true postmodern form, GWAR embraces the fragmentation of interpretation and seeks to have multiple subject positions engage their performances simultaneously. This begins even with the name “GWAR”. There have been multiple explanations of the “meaning” of GWAR. Many argue that it is an acronym for “God What an Awful Racket”, though others have claimed it is an acronym taken from a long-forgotten comic book that means “Gay Women Against Rape”. In the liner notes of the Death Piggy (the band that GWAR founding-members were in before GWAR) album *Smile or Die!*, Russ Bahorsky gives a different explanation of the name. He writes,

[i]n the summer of 1985, we played at the original 9:30 club in Washington DC, and we decided to use some costumes that our friend Hunter Jackson had been saving for a movie he’d planned to make called *Scumdogs of the Universe*. The costumes were made of imitation fur, plastic chains, and urethane foam spikes, and we put together a short list of heavy metal songs to suit the image we’d create on stage. During a rehearsal, a friend of the band let out a drunken howl and said, “why don’t you call yourselves *that?*” I asked him how to spell it, and GWAR was born (Bahorsky, 1999).

Complicating things, however, is the absolute refusal of the band to commit themselves to any one story regarding the origin of the name. They have simultaneously confirmed and denied that it stands for “God What an Awful Racket” and, during the 1991 *America Must Be Destroyed* tour, the show opens with a mock protest where one of the protesters holds a sign that reads, “Gay Women Against Rape” (Mandl & Jackson, 1992). GWAR wants their fans to be unable to know definitively what the name “means”. This serves the function of having their devotees holding multiple subject positions simultaneously and begins the breakdown of the Symbolic. Because the name cannot be part of a single signifying chain, “GWAR” itself resists signification and becomes an aspect of the Real Order. Granted, alone this would be an incomplete project, but it is the perfect starting



point for a roadway to the Real by illustrating the limitations of the Symbolic and forcing audience participants to recognize differing subject positions.

Understanding the different subject positions that can be undertaken by audience participants is important to see the utility of the model outlined in this thesis. Initially, there are two subject positions that can be taken in relation to the first-degree irony. First, the reader/hearer must take a subject position that either recognizes or denies the alternate persona of the rhetor. Recognition of the alternate persona lies inside of the overarching performative ironic circle negotiating different positions in relation to the extended invitation that will be discussed in a moment. Denial of the alternate persona usually implies a declination of the extended invitation as well and places the original subject position outside of the overarching performance. Interestingly, this creation of an “out group” transfers increased agency to the rhetor who can utilize the declination of invitation as a prerequisite to the extension of the first-degree irony to encompass the reader/hearer. The reader/hearer is now encircled by the performance as a subject that is to be undermined. The subject position, rather than being static in denial, is relocated within the performance, playing a necessary role in the overall subversion.

Acceptance of the alternate persona does not, however, imply an acceptance of the extended invitation; to recognize that GVAR takes on a performative alter-ego in an attempt to construct an argument does not imply that one agrees with or enjoys the performance. Acceptance of the alternate persona, but a denial of the extended invitation carves a unique subject space where the reader/hearer lies inside the overarching performative irony, but outside the concentric second-degree ironies. This is the most difficult subject position for the rhetor to address, as it removes the agency granted to the performance to vilify the “out group” (as explained above), while simultaneously

allowing the reader/hearer to dismiss the performance as unimportant. The most dangerous label that can be attached to an ironic rhetor is not “good” or “bad”, but “irrelevant”. This danger of irrelevance can be explained through Žižek’s concept of overidentification. In an effort to minimize the risk of dismissal, not because the rhetoric is incoherent but because the reader/hearer is indifferent, the rhetor must take the logic of the system to the breaking point. A reader/hearer is likely to dismiss the irony as irrelevant only when it fails to speak to issues that matter to the reader/hearer. The rhetor then has the advantage of choosing the subject position of the alternate persona that refuses to accept dismissal as irrelevant. For GWAR, the hypermasculinity, decadence and violent nature of American society manifests itself in their advocacy of child murder, rape, war, drug-use and mutilation. To ensure the reader/hearer gives their argument attention, they target contemporary icons as the subject of their wrath, killing Paris Hilton, Mike Tyson, Michael Jackson, the Pope, priests and others on-stage. They ensure attention by striking us where we live, using the wholesale slaughter of American ideology to create themselves as iconoclasts that must be addressed. Based on the coverage highlighting the controversy that GWAR has created, it appears as if this choice of alternate persona has, indeed, been an effective answer to this concern.

The reader/hearer who accepts the first-degree irony in its entirety and locates himself or herself firmly inside of the overarching ironic performance must now be explored. These audience participants now assume one of many multiple flickering subject positions within the constructed second-degree ironies. The first determining factor in where the reader/hearer can position themselves among the second-degree ironies is the exposure they have to the performances, which can implicate access to the Real. This thesis has articulated, though has by no means exhausted, some of the ironic

pro-war performances of GWAR, but made little to no mention of the theological arguments (in songs like “Death Pod”, “Techno’s Song”, “The Private Pain of Techno Destructo”, “Meat Sandwich”, “The Master Has a Butt”, etc.) or violence against women arguments (in songs like “Don’t Need a Man”, “Penis I See”, “Black and Huge”, “Slap U Around”, etc.) that are made. A reader/hearer who has exposure to GWAR only through this writing can carve out subject positions based on their war rhetoric, but not the other arguments. This most certainly has an effect on the bridge to the Real for it is in the intersections of ironic performances and the gaps between them that the bridge is constructed. That being said, however, glimpses to the Real are always necessarily incomplete for they deny signification; these glimpses are now a discussion of degrees and not the vivisection of the project as a whole. Further, exposure to incomplete performances could inspire the reader/hearer to seek out other utterances in an attempt to create a complete picture.

These divergent subject positions are the flickering subjects of which Lacan speaks. Reader/hearers can move in and out of different subject positions based on exposure to the interplay between increasingly complicated second-degree permutations. From this exposure, a reader/hearer can accept certain invitations and decline others, placing him or her in simultaneous contradictory subject spaces, both engaging the performance and being engaged by the performance and both populating the “in group” and “out group”. There are countless permutations of subject positions that can be articulated that could literally fill thousands of pages. The important point, however, is the recognition that conceiving of ironies not as singular static entities but rather intersecting spheres inside of an overarching ironic performance allows for agency for both the rhetor and the reader/hearer that encourages the constant (re)negotiating of

subject positions. This agency allows both the rhetor and the reader/hearer to participate in the dialogue. The only remaining question is how GVAR provides access to glimpses of the Real.

GVAR begins their performative project firmly entrenched in Lacanian fantasy. Again, Lacan's interpretation of fantasy is not the same as we often think of fantastical imagination. For Lacan, fantasy is not to be deciphered and decoded, not to be "pushed through" to resolve; fantasy, rather, exists for humans to see their inconsistencies and shortcomings. Ironic fantasy exploits the self-reflexive nature of ironic language to reveal both the inherent limitations of language and the officious desires of the ironic rhetor. As opposed to attacking with these shortcomings as opponents of irony do, the ironic proponent instead embraces these limitations. These limitations expose the gaps in the Symbolic and open the reader/hearer to the idea that some things are innomable, a necessary prerequisite for access to the Real Order.

Fantasy coupled with rhetor and audience agency allows the two sides of the performance to come together in a unique shared subject position from which they can glimpse the Real Order. Neither side is able to lock down the subject position of the other as both sides potentially hold simultaneous contradictory subject positions. This forces the two sides to negotiate a unique subject position in the gaps of the performance that they may share together from within the fantasy. Within this space both sides enter into a new mirror stage, recognizing their individuality using the rhetor or reader/hearer as the metaphoric mirror. Both sides find themselves incomplete without the other. The rhetor's argument depends on an audience to carry performative weight and the reader/hearer must have a rhetor to construct the artifact for him or her to read/hear. This new mirror stage that occurs at the subject event horizon creates a unique Imaginary

Order that exists between the rhetor and the reader/hearer where each is dependent upon the other to fulfill the need (as an infant is dependent upon an adult for feeding). From the Imaginary Order of the subject event horizon, the now co-dependent subjects are drawn inexorably towards the subject singularity where the rhetor and reader/hearer are no longer distinct from one another, but a singular product of the performance that has transcended them both. This place, where there is no distinction between the squirrel and the tree, the rhetor and the reader/hearer, is where the Real Order resides.

GWAR waits, in this way, recognizing the inconsistencies of human nature, the hypocrisy of human politics and the fragile state of our existence. They have extended their invitation and now they wait for us to join them at the subject event horizon in the gaps of the performance. GWAR writes,

All creatures born are born to die but before then survive  
 Some creatures born never live but still they are alive  
 Upon a bony steed I sway, my scythe above the herd  
 I want to murder everyone in the entire world  
 Death feeds the cycle, driven by your hate  
 Can't you see that there's nothing left to create?  
 All is for me to destroy  
 And emptiness employ ...  
 The young are simply too dumb to live  
 The old are weak and unclean  
 The ones in the middle – they also must die  
 Their ways are obtuse and obscene  
 Biledriver! Bring forth the biledriver!  
 All is for me to destroy  
 And emptiness enjoy (GWAR, 2001).

GWAR embraces the contradictions and fragmented approach to human existence. All creatures are born to live but some never live, though they are alive. The only human certainty for them is hatred and they deploy humanity's hatred as death. With the biledriver, GWAR will exterminate not just life on this planet, but spread war throughout the universe until only emptiness and themselves remain. Within the violence, categories

collapse on themselves like the singularity of a black hole. In America, “we must attack the very children that we taught that they must never fight the fucked up wars that we have fought” (GWAR, 2001). It ceases to matter if we are killing Iraqis in the name of national interest, terrorists in the name of national security, criminals in the name of justice, the dumb youth, the weak elderly or the obscene ones in the middle. To the reader/hearer GWAR wishes us all a “Happy Death Day” and invites us to bring them the Biledriver for “there is only one way to save you; rape maim and enslave you” (GWAR, 2001). From our signification, we breed hate and violence. Though we do have a choice: continue along our path to extinction, or overidentify with GWAR, bring them the biledriver and seek the Real through the gaps of their concentric ironies.

GWAR stands as an example of an effective deployment of irony as viewed within the vision of irony articulated in this thesis. They effectively carve out a public alternate persona that is easily recognized by both themselves and the reader/hearer. From this alternate persona, GWAR constructs multiple first-degree ironies that utilize pseudo-ironic utterances to serve as an anchor point for the reader-hearer. Intersecting these pseudo-ironic utterances are both implicit and explicit invitations to the reader/hearer to become an active participant in the dialogue. The reader/hearer then has the option to accept the invitation and engage the artifact in more depth (become a member of the “in-group”) or to decline the invitation and be engulfed by the second-degree ironic arguments as a target of subversion (and a member of the “out-group”). This conception of irony as intersecting spheres inside of an overarching performance answers the three primary criticisms leveled at existing irony theory: incoherent dismissal, replication of the hegemonic discourse and the loss of audience agency. However, the fundamental question of “so what” still remains.

In addition to side-stepping the criticisms of existing irony theory, utilization of Lacanian psychoanalysis in a reconceptualization of ironic performances as concentric provides glimpses into the Real Order. In every overarching performance, gaps appear where the innomable resides. Embracing overidentification and the contradictions inherent in the symbolization of fantasms allows the rhetor and the reader/hearer to come together inside the gaps to the subject event horizon, from which they together are able to glimpse the subject singularity where the bridge to the Real Order has been built. While it is admittedly impossible to articulate the Real from within in the Symbolic Order, this thesis argues that glimpses of the Real are internalized and help shape the Symbolic, thus having a now nomable effect on perceived reality.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS**

Existing irony theory conceives of ironic arguments as static singular entities where the literal message is the opposite of the expressed message and requires the reader/hearer to be able to decode the utterance as such. Rhetorical critics are sharply divided over the effectiveness of ironic arguments. Proponents of irony argue that the sophisticated nature of the form requires an intimate engagement of the artifact by the reader/hearer and opens avenues for criticism that other argument forms do not provide. Opponents of irony argue that the form itself is problematic and offer criticisms that existing irony theory has yet to adequately answer. Opponents level three primary arguments against the ironic form. First, they argue that irony, because it requires the reader/hearer to decipher contradictory claims within a singular artifact, risks dismissal of the argument because it is viewed by the reader/hearer as being internally incoherent. Second, they argue that attempts to maintain internal consistency (use of Shugart's "stable premise", for example) potentially replicate the hegemonic discourse by creating an anchor point for the irony that is rooted in the system the arguer is attempting to subvert. Finally, opponents argue that attempts to answer the previous concerns often put the defenders of irony in the position of removing audience agency by prescribing "good" behavior by the reader/hearer. This, they argue, puts an unfair burden on the audience



when critics should concern themselves more with the actions of the rhetor. The theory of irony outlined here avoids this problem.

The problems for proponents of ironic discourse are compounded when subversive irony is viewed through a postmodern filter. Postmodern subversive ironic arguments, by their very nature, require a close engagement by the reader/hearer if they are to accomplish their “subversive” intentions. However, this close connection to the audience puts the defender of irony in the unenviable position of having to defend both that a reader/hearer will engage the artifact in a particular way (to avoid concerns of incoherent dismissal), that they will come to a particular conclusion (to maintain claims of the efficacy of irony as an argument form) *and* that these claims are not an artificial manufacturing of audience agency. A close examination of what is being required of proponents quickly reveals that they are in a classic double-bind where each argument in defense of one level of these criticisms only serves to “prove” the opponents’ arguments on another level.

This thesis contends that existing irony theory fails to adequately address the criticisms against the argument form because existing theory mischaracterizes the true nature of irony. Rather than conceiving of irony as static singularities, it is important to recognize an ironic utterance as a part of a larger argumentative project. This recharacterizing of irony allows critics to look not at the effects of singular utterances on a reader/hearer, but rather the effects from a range of ironic performances and their interactions. This reconceptualization further provides the audience reprieve and guarantees their agency by realizing that the inherent power of irony as an argument form lies with the rhetor and the performances, should they choose to take advantage of the opportunities afforded to them.

### Rescuing Lacan for Irony

The work of Jacques Lacan is becoming more and more prevalent in the field of rhetorical studies. A large-scale application of his writings to a new theory of irony has yet to be attempted until now. This thesis has rescued the work of Lacan from the trappings of psychoanalysis and utilized his theories to cultivate an entirely new theory of irony. Vital to the discussion of irony is Lacan's conception of language. Like most structuralists, Lacan recognizes the relationship between the signifier and the signified, though Lacan preferences the signifier over the signified and argues that language becomes a chain of signifiers. Lacan argues that all aspects of human experience are similarly structured like language and that humans cannot conceive of anything that is not ultimately filtered through our symbol systems. Language is the vehicle for human expression and is how we describe and explain the world to ourselves and others, terminally trapping humans in their own language system. From this linguistic prison, all human behavior is filtered through our symbol systems, including the unconscious. This holds multiple implications for ironic rhetors. First and foremost, if all human behavior is ultimately filtered through and structured like language, then even nonverbal ironic performances are internalized by the audience as a linguistic performance. This means that theory that is applicable to language-based irony is equally applicable to nonverbal ironic performances. Additionally, if the unconscious is structured like language then subconscious or unnamable effects that the ironic rhetor may have on a reader/hearer will be internalized as language. This internalization holds the potential to alter the language of the reader/hearer, and altered language alters reality because reality itself is conceived of as language. The argument that bridges to the Real and glimpses of the innomable are able to (re)structure reality becomes clearer when Lacan's three orders are examined.

Lacan argues that there are three orders: the Imaginary Order, the Symbolic Order, and the Real Order. The Imaginary Order exists up until the mirror stage in the development of an infant. The Symbolic Order is what humans perceive as “reality” because it is learned at an early age that we must understand the Symbolic to participate in the human community. Lacan argues that once an infant recognizes a need that s/he cannot fulfill himself or herself (the need to eat, for example), the infant recognizes the “I” and his or her own individuality. S/he then internalizes the need for symbol manipulation to fulfill other needs. This recognition of the need for signification is both liberating and imprisoning for humans. The Real Order is that which is unnamable and resists signification. To be clear, the Real Order is not “reality” and is not more real than the symbolic, but it should not be assumed that the Real Order is less real either. Because humans conceive of “reality” through the Symbolic Order, it is tempting to disregard that which resists signification as unimportant; however, this dismissal is simply not true. The Real Order is as closely entwined with “reality” as is the Symbolic Order, but cannot be expressed in linguistic terms. Access to the Real Order can be internalized by humans, structured like language and transferred into the Symbolic. Once the Real is symbolized, it ceases to be the Real but the Symbolic; however, it is the contention of this thesis that access to the Real reshapes the Symbolic in ways that are determined by the bridge built to the Real. Simply put, it is impossible to symbolize the Real Order, but our attempts to symbolize the glimpses of the Real reconfigure the Symbolic Order allowing irony to effectuate “real” change.

Another important concept of Lacanian psychoanalysis is the notion of fantasy. The ironic rhetor constructs a performance that manufactures a fantasy world and asks the reader/hearer to play an important role in that fantasy construction. This invitation

asks the reader/hearer to “remember” themselves in similar situations so that they may contribute to the evolution of the fantasm. For Lacan, the “remembrance” is not a literal remembrance, but rather the ability of a person to symbolically conceive of himself or herself in the situation. The effect of fantasy is particularly important for Lacan as many in the field of psychoanalysis have attempted to use fantasy and role-play as a means of therapy. For Lacan, the terminal result of fantasy is not to “solve” a problem or to “push through” to a single understanding of “reality”, but to see the different interpretations of “reality” that exist from multiple subject positions. Much like Lacan puts the emphasis on the signifier over the signified, here he puts the emphasis on the fantasy over “reality” and argues that “reality” does not create fantasy, but fantasy creates “reality”. For the ironic rhetor, it is the construction of his or her fantasy that holds the potential to reshape “reality” from a multitude of subject positions.

A closer examination of these Lacanian precepts holds immense potential for the defender of ironic argument. From a Lacanian perspective, the power to manufacture the ironic fantasm lies with the rhetor, which drives “reality” and ensures a “correct” reading without damning audience agency. In fact, Lacan provides the ironic rhetor an additional arrow for his or her rhetorical quiver by demanding that humans confront their own filtered view of “reality” through the occupation of multiple contradictory subject positions simultaneously. The ironic rhetor asks the reader/hearer to choose their subject position in relation to the ironic performance. Opponents of irony, when questioning the agency of such a choice, attempt to lock the flickering subject into a static position, which, Lacan argues, risks permanent evaporation of the subject. Rather than defend themselves against the double-bind of existing irony theory, Lacan liberates the ironic rhetor and the reader/hearer alike.

### A New Theory of Irony and the Case Study

Incorporating the work of Lacan into existing irony theory is impossible as many of the foundational assumptions of the existing body of literature have presuppositions that Lacan questions. Irony theory must be completely reconfigured to account for what Lacan brings to the academic discussion. This thesis offers Concentric Irony Theory as such a reconfiguration and argues that not only does it sufficiently answer the existing criticisms leveled against irony, it also holds the liberatory potential of providing glimpses into the Real Order that may assist us in laying a blueprint for a more benign and peaceful society. This thesis uses the rhetoric of performance punk/metal band GWAR as a case study for this reconceptualization of subversive ironic discourse.

First and foremost, rhetors must recognize that they occupy spaces on the argumentative landscape that are unique. From this space they have the opportunity to create a persona that exists for the sole reason of articulating the desired ironic arguments of the rhetor. This alternate persona is distinct from the rhetors themselves and must be clearly recognized as a distinct incarnation of the rhetorical subject. For GWAR, their alternate personas are clearly distinct from the rhetors and recognized as rhetors separate from the persons “behind the mask” GWAR accomplishes this by donning the costumes of interplanetary alien warriors and taking on different names for their characters. There is no mistaking Dave Brockie, native Virginian art-school graduate, for his alternate persona “Oderus Urungus”, alien leader of the Scumdogs of the Universe and mutinous former servant of the Master of All Reality.

From this alternate persona the rhetor may create first-degree ironies that utilize the pseudo-ironic utterance. The pseudo-ironic utterance takes the place of Shugart’s stable premise in that it is ironic only to the rhetor as alternate persona. The stable

premise runs the risk of replicating the hegemonic discourse by anchoring the reader/hearer in the language of the system; the pseudo-ironic utterance, however, does not fall prey to the same concerns because, from the subject position of the alternate persona, the language of the system is being deployed to undermine and subvert that same system. Functionally, this orients the reader/hearer to the desires of the rhetor, but the recognition of the alternate persona short-circuits the damning potential that the rhetor inadvertently props up the system s/he seeks to indict.

From the first-degree ironies, the rhetor is now able to construct multiple second-degree ironies as an overarching performance. Here the rhetor extends an invitation to the reader/hearer to join him or her in the project of subversion. The reader/hearer maintains agency throughout the exchange, for it is his or her choice to accept or decline the invitation; however, the choice itself is inconsequential to the efficacy of the project. If the reader/hearer decides to decline the extended invitation and place himself or herself outside the overarching performance, s/he is made to populate the “out group” and is now part of the targeted subversion. This decision, while preserving audience agency, allows the performance to engulf the reader/hearer, maintaining their participation in the project. If the reader/hearer decides to accept the extended invitation, s/he places himself or herself firmly inside the overarching performance and now must negotiate different subject positions within and between the intersecting performances.

This thesis argues that reconceptualizing ironic utterances as concentric performances answers the demands placed on existing irony theory by opponents of the argument form. Additionally, however, it is argued that viewing irony thusly also allows access to the Real Order. Conceiving of ironic utterances as concentric parts to a larger whole allows both the rhetor and the reader/hearer to hold multiple contradictory subject

positions simultaneously within the larger project, which allows them to come together in dialogue at a unique event horizon subject space. At the event horizon the rhetor and the reader/hearer find themselves in a new mirror stage, co-dependent on each other for their maintenance in this new subject position. From here the now conflated rhetor/reader/hearer moves towards the point of singularity subject position where the gaps and contradictions within the overarching project are revealed, stripped away and a brief glimpse to the Real Order is provided. From this point of singularity subject position, both the rhetor and the reader/hearer can return to their flickering subject positions to internalize and symbolically bastardize the Real into the Symbolic, reconfigure their personal Symbolic space and repeat the cycle. This repetition of the cycle is the call to action that opponents of existing irony theory contend do not exist within ironic argument. The point of singularity allows the rhetor and reader/hearer both to hold the space open for critical inquiry while simultaneously making a call for political change.

#### Future Research

It is my sincere hope that this writing opens a larger dialogue on irony and serves a more heuristic function. Some may argue that this reconceptualization of irony holds no promise for rhetors that do not articulate an alternate persona. However, I contend that every ironic rhetor employs an alternate persona by the mere fact that they chose to engage in an ironic performance. While it might not be as clearly articulated as GEAR's, every ironic arguer has an alternate persona because every person has a multitude of personas. For example, a professor at the local university has a minimum of two personas that can be outlined with little to no question. At work, she is Dr. Smith, though in her personal life her family and friends most likely call her "Jane" or maybe

“mom”. Everyone maintains different personas depending on the situation and this theory asks for nothing different but for the recognition of that alternate persona when the ironic utterance is made. Further, even if this is a mistaken assumption, just because Concentric Irony Theory may not account for every instance, this thesis argues that it could. Will every ironic rhetor acknowledge and articulate the alternate persona? Most likely, the answer is “no”. By that same token, though, not every arguer has warrants for their claims, but we do not discount Toulmin’s model of argument. If the reasoning of this thesis is sound, an argument can be made that even though every ironic rhetor does not recognize their alternate persona, every ironic rhetor should for the reasons articulated in this thesis.

This thesis has attempted to account for every ironic utterance by utilizing Lacan’s interpretation of the Symbolic Order, the structure of language and the structure of the unconscious. However, there are arguably situations that are less “performative” in nature than the GWAR case study outlined here that illustrate the shortcomings of this theory. Future research could outline these less performative ironic utterances and expand the theory to account for such cases. For example, a GWAR “spin-off” band (the Dave Brockie Experience) makes similar arguments to GWAR, but without the use of the alternate persona (the band members perform as themselves). Future research could juxtapose the performances of GWAR and the performances of the Dave Brockie Experience and evaluate how necessary the alternate persona is to the argumentative landscape.

By the same token, however, I believe it a misnomer to believe that irony is the sole possession of Leftist progressive politics. The conservative end of the spectrum has had their fair share of ironic performances as well, many of which could even be



considered to have a publicly recognized alternate persona. For example, Morton Downey, Jr. and Rush Limbaugh (both controversial figures in their own right) have both publicly noted that they are entertainers and not political figures, though their performances were/are most certainly political in nature. While Rush Limbaugh has never argued that Democrats should be fed to the World Maggot, many of his comments are one step shy of doing so. Future research could move from the far-Left discourse of GEAR to the far-Right discourse of a Limbaugh or a Downey, Jr. to determine if the theory outlined here works equally well regardless of political affiliation. Of course, to be fair, many may argue that GEAR is not “far-Left” (as I have characterized them), but apolitical, using their special subject position to outline the contradictions in all political ideologies and placements on the spectrum. This point certainly carries with it a level of validity and would then shift the question of future research to those ironic rhetors who most certainly place themselves on the Left or Right of the political spectrum (for example, Rush Limbaugh and Al Franken).

#### A New Methodology and the Winds of Change

While I am not so bold as to assume this thesis will revolutionize the way rhetorical critics approach ironic argument, I do believe that it is a methodological tool that can, and should, be added to the rhetorical critic’s toolbox. If the arguments made by rhetorical critics early in this thesis are true (that irony is “ubiquitous” and a “defining literary attribute”), then it would not be a stretch to consider the possibility that some element of irony lies in nearly every rhetorical artifact. Is it then fair to the intellectual endeavor for the rhetorical critic to utilize a pentadic analysis and confine himself or herself to the dozen pages that Burke devotes to irony? I contend that the discussion of irony is integral to nearly every rhetorical project, not simply those that are overtly (if

that itself is possible) ironic. I offer that this theory constructs a methodology that provides not only a model for ironic rhetors to follow, but a methodology that can be of use to the rhetorical critics who evaluate them. Even if the conception of irony outlined here is overly confined by the need for an overtly performative act, this thesis will hopefully return critics to ironic discussions and open the door for the incorporation of Lacanian psychoanalysis into the dialogue.

Ironic rhetors that rescue Lacan from psychoanalysis and incorporate him into argumentation and rhetorical studies will find themselves richly rewarded for their efforts. Interpretations of ironic utterances that recognize the preeminence of the Signifier and the flickering nature of subject positions are allowed luxuries that existing irony theory cannot provide. An active ironic rhetor can easily take advantage of the new opportunities afforded to him or her and deploy ironic arguments to effect large-scale change. Even while the argumentative seas are rife with danger, more and more rhetors are being drawn by irony's call. The inability of existing irony theory to adjust its traditional view and answer even the most basic challenges marks this call most certainly the song of the Sirens, dooming these rhetors to incalculable failure. A reconfiguring of irony, however, holds tremendous promise for these arguers and rhetorical critics alike. It is possible for us to transform the song of the Sirens into the deafening sound of the winds of change, if we only have the courage to take the challenge.

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