

This is the author's accepted manuscript of an article published in *HUMOR* 2015; 28(2): 327–347 2015 which has been published in final form at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/humor-2015-0024>.

Simon Weaver<sup>1</sup>

**The rhetoric of disparagement humor:  
An analysis of anti-semitic joking online**

**Abstract:** Studies of humor informed by an understanding of rhetoric offer a number of conceptual tools for the analysis of disparagement humor. This article examines recent rhetorical approaches to humor analysis and evaluates their strengths and weaknesses. Where possible, it seeks to synthesise these approaches for what might be called an emerging methodological branch of humor studies. Although not all rhetorical analysts can be considered critical theorists, the article argues for the particular usefulness of these approaches for critical humor studies. A sample of 28 online anti-Semitic jokes is used to illustrate the various methods of rhetorical humor analysis. The discussion examines the fundamental assumptions, propositions, uniqueness and limitations of each theory. The central observation is that rhetorical humor analysis provides methods that add to disparagement theory. This central observation is supported by three points: that humor is structured with rhetorical devices that might, in various ways, convince; that the context of utterance influences the meaning of humor and thus the context of utterance is rhetorical; and, that the discursive content of humor provides the material to be reinforced.

**Keywords:** anti-semitic humor, disparagement humor, internet humor, rhetoric, rhetorical analysis of humor

**1 Introduction – disparagement humor/disparagement rhetoric**

This article seeks to outline and synthesise the various approaches to the rhetorical analysis of humor and show how they can be used to analyse disparagement humor. A small sample of anti-Semitic online jokes is used to highlight the most useful points made by rhetorical analysts on humor, joking and rhetoric.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Simon Weaver, Sociology and Communications, Brunel University, Uxbridge UB83PH, UK, E-mail: [simon.weaver@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:simon.weaver@brunel.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Anti-Semitic jokes have been chosen as an illustrative sample that highlights the usefulness of rhetorical analysis for understanding the meanings of disparagement humor. Samples of jokes directed at other ethnic groups could have been chosen, as could a mix of jokes about different groups. There are, no doubt, many similarities between some of the jokes mentioned and those directed at other ethnic groups, in terms of their structure, context and content, and the rhetoric produced. This sample was chosen because it provides a well-known and thus accessible example with which to discuss the theoretical positions outlined in the article. The focus of the article is on highlighting the usefulness of rhetorical approaches for unpacking racism and the widespread familiarity with Jewish stereotypes and the history of racism, in this case, allows for a more accessible discussion.

The definition of disparagement humor used in this article follows Ford and Ferguson (2004): '[d]isparagement humor (e.g. racist or sexist humor) is humor that denigrates, belittles, or maligns an individual or social group' (79). That said, definitions of denigrating, belittling and maligning are never clear-cut. Humor is also a discursive form that contains the potential for polysemy, so the interpretation of a joke can vary from one individual or social group to the next. This means that any claim of disparagement needs to be coherently made and accurately contextualised. A part of the usefulness of the rhetorical analysis of humor is its ability to acknowledge the polysemy of humor, while allowing problematic readings to be unpacked and critiqued.

The disparagement humor that is discussed here – online anti-Semitic jokes – can be defined as racist joking. I have argued elsewhere that 'racist humor' can, in fact, be a descriptive term, rather than one loaded with normative judgement (Weaver 2010). Humor that employs languages of race (be they biological or cultural), dichotomous race stereotype and/or presents inferiorisation or social exclusion, can quite accurately be described as racist humor in that it has the potential to create racist readings in particular contexts (see Weaver 2010, Weaver 2011, and Weaver 2013 for an expanded discussion of these points). This definition of racist humor can be applied to the jokes examined in this article. The context in which they are presented aids this definition, although the polysemy of humor remains and other readings that do not reproduce racism may be possible.

It has been argued that there is a denial of responsibility among joke tellers for the enjoyment of the content of disparagement jokes (Zillman 1983). A rhetorical analysis does not require that jokers acknowledge their enjoyment of joking, responsibility for it, or equally, admit intended meaning. It is an approach that seeks to unpack how meaning is generated so that the connections between humor, seriousness and the construction of convincing communication can be seen. Once this is achieved, the denials and disclaimers presented by jokers are easily viewed as no longer necessarily central to meaning generation, or often simply faulty.

Rhetoric, in this article, is simply defined as convincing communication. All of the rhetorical analysts discussed here use different definitions of rhetoric but there are also many similarities and overlaps, and in some cases, ideas of an almost identical nature expressed through different conceptual terminology. Of central importance to my argument is the observation of the similarity between humorous incongruity and metaphor, which is one of the key devices of rhetorical communication. This special issue is concerned with the social consequences of disparagement humor. A rhetorical analysis of disparagement humor suggests that there are ideologies, discourses, ways of thinking, stereotypes and prejudiced forms of social structure that can, in some social situations, be reinforced by disparagement humor, joking and laughter. The rationale behind these arguments will be explored in the article, with my own ideas on rhetorical analysis presented towards the end. Theorists are explained through an identification of their fundamental assumptions, propositions, uniqueness and limitations (see Appendix 2 in online supplementary material for a summary of this). Before that, I outline the joke sample used.

## **1.1 The joke sample**

The jokes analysed in this article all originate from one source, the website [www.racist-jokes.info](http://www.racist-jokes.info). The site contains racist jokes directed at a number of groups, including Black people and Mexicans, as well as Jewish people. There are 28 anti-Semitic jokes on the site, thus the joke sample is small. It has been selected as a tool for highlighting how rhetorical humor analysis can be used to analyse disparagement humor. This is, therefore, not a comprehensive survey of anti-Semitic jokes, in terms of their context of creation, the types of jokes that exist, the amount that appear online, or their similarity to, or differences from, other racist jokes (for a more detailed discussion of the types of anti-Semitic jokes that exist online see Weaver 2013). The jokes are labelled 'Jewish jokes' on the website but it is unlikely that they are the type of jokes that Jewish people would tell about themselves. The jokes are, for the most part, aggressive, violent and depict stereotype, although the latter do, of course, appear in some self-deprecating Jewish jokes. Overall, the humor conforms to the definition of disparagement and racist humor outlined above.

The website is important for framing humor in the context of racist discourse. This context is a key component of the analysis of humor when rhetorical principles are employed. The website – [www.racist-jokes.info](http://www.racist-jokes.info) – is one that contains texts and images that denote extreme racism. This is a US based website. The site contains links to extreme right organisations, such as the Golden State Skin Heads, a US white supremacist/nationalist group. The Golden State Skin Heads organisation exists in the context and history of Californian racism, which has directed significant prejudice and violence at Native Americans, Asians, Mexicans and African-Americans (Daniels and Olin 1972). As mentioned previously, there are pages on this website devoted to joking about Mexicans and African-Americans alongside the Jewish jokes. The particulars of racism directed at Jews in California has been documented as less harsh than that of other groups, with Daniels and Olin arguing that 'Jews encountered significantly less prejudice than they did in the supposedly more enlightened East' (ibid: v), and that they were 'promoted' by their 'whiteness'. Despite this, anti-Semitism is frequently a component of much fascist ideology, and the Golden State Skin Heads certainly conform to this brand. US anti-Semitism is not exceptional in that it uses a stock of cultural and physical stereotypes and exclusionary language that principally focus on an image of the Jew as lacking loyalty to the nation (Rattansi 2007: 64).

It is important to discuss the differences between humor as it appears in new media in distinction to examples such as published joke books, broadcast comedy or live stand-up comedy. It would be a truism to state that the internet is subject to less censorship or censure than race-based humor in either joke books, situation comedy or stand-up comedy. There is little regulation of racist humor online and this leads to the expression of more socially abrasive, often biological, racisms in comparison to those found in many everyday interactions and almost all broadcast media production or live comedy performance. This makes the internet an ideal space for the culturally and politically extreme to be expressed. Goriunova (2012) has detailed the 'new media idiocy' that she describes as a central frame of expression on the internet. New media idiocy is described by Goriunova as 'a mode of living that explores the true through the false' (2012: 223). Simply put, this is online satire, parody and irony being used to attack dominant 'truths'. She outlines the performance of idiocy for political purposes (2012: 224–6) as an emerging trend that is encouraged by the instantaneous character of the internet. Goriunova (2012) is rather positive about idiocy as a means of

overcoming dominant discourse. Through the humor of [www.racist-jokes.info](http://www.racist-jokes.info) we can build on her observation and highlight what might be called the 'dark side' of idiocy. Goriunova identifies the 'networked and technical' (ibid: 224), and the instantaneous – these are the specifics of internet humor. Those that leave racist humor on the internet certainly use technology to create networks and archives. It is also instantly accessible to the consumer. We can view racist humor on the internet as an expression of dark idiocy that seeks to work against the hegemony of bourgeois liberal anti-racism, using the internet to express increasing unacceptable humor. This humor, rather than exploring 'the true through the false', seeks to present the false as true, often under the disclaimer of 'irony'. It is also a humor that can, and often does, become viral (ibid: 227–8).

## **2 The rhetorical devices of humor and joking**

The first set of approaches presented in this discussion are primarily focused on the identification of the rhetorical techniques that are used to construct humor and joking, or to create laughter at the structural or linguistic level. This approach is exemplified in the writings of Jerry Palmer and Arthur Asa Berger.

Jerry Palmer (1987) offers an account whose fundamental assumption is that the structure of humor is metaphorical. Metaphor is, for some, the central building block of rhetoric (Eco 1986: 61). If we accept the centrality of metaphor in rhetorical communication, we can use Palmer's account as one that explains the functions of humor as wedded to communicative rhetoric. He identifies the 'peripeteia' (Palmer 1987: 39–40) of the joke, or the point of incongruity, surprise or contrast that allows the joke to move in a different or unexpected direction. Palmer explains that a peripeteia is constitutive of the joke. A peripeteia is positioned between two syllogisms or premises, which he describes as the major and minor premise (ibid: 42). All jokes begin with one logic or premise before shifting to a second logic or premise. All of these shifts will move against expectations in particular social structures (ibid: 59). Some humorous incongruities are resolved in jokes although some are not. It is this metaphorical potential in humor that directs us to its meaning making capacity. Palmer (1987: 56) proposes that humorous peripeteia is less 'plausible' than non-humorous metaphor. This point might derail a rhetorical analysis if it were correct but we know that 'true' humor exists, which requires plausibility at some level, and there are many metaphors that are implausible. Thus, the scope for critical analysis remains.

The structural link between metaphor and humor – the similar semantic structure – firmly roots the comic in the sphere of rhetoric. The comic, although not always identical to non-humorous metaphor, is a device rhetorical in nature. Social actors may make points using the comic that touch on or attack it, or that deal with, negotiate or critique less than plausible forms of knowledge. Palmer described the rhetoric of the comic as the conceptualisation of the butt as either absurd or ridiculous (ibid: 91). The comic can be a form of convincing communication that reduces individuals or groups to absurdisms and it is the content of the premises involved that needs to be interrogated to unpack where, exactly, the rhetorical impact of the comic resides. The following anti-Semitic joke can be used to illustrate the points made by Palmer:

Why do Jews have such big noses?  
Because air is free!

([www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html](http://www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html), no date).

In this joke, we can see that the peripeteia or incongruity is positioned in between two premises. Both of these premises rely on stereotypes of Jewish people. The first is the biological stereotype that Jewish people have large noses, the second that Jewish people are miserly. We can see that the stereotypes are connected in the joke, through what Palmer would describe as the logic of the absurd. Because the premises construct a peripeteia, incongruity or humorous metaphor, they are contained by a device that can construct meaning around these stereotypes in certain readings or contexts (more will be said on the analysis of context below). Rhetoric is the art of convincing, and jokes can be used to make interesting contrasts that have the potential to persuade, if only momentarily. This point is perhaps best highlighted if we examine the joke from the opposite perspective – there is nothing in the joke that actively works to refute stereotype.

Arthur Asa Berger (1995, 2010a, 2010b) outlines an approach to humor analysis with the fundamental assumption that rhetorical devices are used to structure humor and joking. These are linguistic or semantic structures. Berger states that his concern is ‘not with techniques that are used to persuade people to believe something but techniques that can be used to “persuade” people to laugh’ (1995: 53). He proposes that it is primarily the techniques of humor that generate laughter rather than the subject matter (ibid). Through content analysis research, he uniquely identifies forty-five humor tropes, each of which is split into one of four categories: the humor of logic, language based humor, identity humor and visual humor (ibid, 54–55; see Appendix 1 in online supplementary material for the full list).

Berger’s typology is certainly an exceptional resource for the deconstruction of humor and joking – it is the most complete typology of humorous rhetorical devices available. The typology can be used to demonstrate the tropes used in this anti-Semitic disparagement joke:

Why are Jewish synagogues round?

So they cant hide in the corner when the collection box comes round!

([www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html](http://www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html), no date)

We can see that the joke contains the techniques definition (13), stereotype (43) and ridicule (36). The shape of the Jewish synagogue is defined through the joke. This definition is then accounted for because of a very common Jewish stereotype, that Jews are miserly. Stereotype works to reduce the existence of any people to crude simplifications. It is this reduction through stereotype that leads to the construction of ridicule or to the derision of the butt of the joke (more will be said on the connections between humor, ridicule and rhetoric later). Of course, the polysemy of humor remains and other readings of the joke are possible but the unpacking of these devices allows us to establish the beginnings of the definition of this joke as a form of disparagement humor. Berger’s typology can deconstruct the parts of the joke that may lead to the construction of certain meanings and so render critique against the combination of certain tropes with certain contents.

Despite this potential, and although Berger donates a methodology for the rhetorical analysis of humor, at no point does Berger employ the theory of rhetorical humor for the criticism of disparagement humor. Berger expresses his aim as being to allow us to improve our humor, rather than engage in critical theory:

A knowledge of the techniques that are used to generate humor in jokes and other humorous texts can be used to create one's own humor. (Berger 2010a: 9)

This perhaps highlights a disciplinary limit for Berger, and a comment on the difference between his rhetorical analysis and Aristotle's offers further understanding of these limits. Berger describes the 'narrow' analysis of Aristotle as 'defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion' (Aristotle 1941, 1329 in Berger 1995: 51) and suggests that he expands from this, as many modern rhetoricians do. In this case, the expansion becomes a concern not for the generation of persuasion but the generation of the persuasion to laugh. This then ignores the extent to which humor itself can be persuasive and laughter generating. This is a point that seems all the more necessary to address because humor relies on rhetorical devices at the semantic level. There are also limits to the analysis that can be developed with Berger's typology. The above joke is unpacked well enough but this is where the analysis ends. Nothing is said about the context in which humor appears, or the wider social discourses outside of the tropes used. I will return to these points below.

In addition to the typology of humor tropes, Berger outlines a semiotic analysis of humor in *Blind Men and Elephants* (1995), which is relevant to this study. Semioticians that are influenced by Roland Barthes are concerned with Rhetoric of disparagement humor the unpacking of ideology, with the dominant rhetorical techniques of metaphor and metonym and their ideological functions. Thus rhetorical analysis and semiotics overlap in terms of both the objects of analysis and the description of meaning making processes. This is not something that Berger links – his chapters on semiotics and rhetoric in this book remain distinct and rather disconnected. The strength of Berger's writing is his summary of important theoretical positions (which are often useful for the analysis of disparagement humor). He falls down in his development of the connections between those theories, as they often appear as various 'options' to be taken off the shelf for analysis without critical consequence. Semiotic approaches will also be returned to later in this article.

The approaches of Palmer and Berger clearly show the connection between humor and rhetoric. Metaphor, metonym and the wide array of tropes connected to them can be used to construct jokes. We can see that disparagement humor, aside from having particular motives, is structured in such a way as to have pejorative readings in particular contexts. I argue it is more useful to diverge from Berger's particular 'broad' reading of the rhetoric of humor and attempt to return to Aristotle's narrow approach. This leads us back to the superiority theory of humor – the idea that jokers and jokes ridicule their butts. Although there is no evidence that this is a universal occurrence in joking, in disparagement humor, an Aristotelian reading of humor allows us to explain ridicule through a consideration of the devices used to structure humor as those that have communicative potential.

### 3 Kenneth Burke and the rhetoric of redefined reality

Approaches to the rhetorical understanding of the comic derived from the work of the rhetorician and philosopher Kenneth Burke (1969, 1984 [1937]) are perhaps the most difficult to reconcile with the others outlined in this article. Although this is a difficult task, it will prove to be a fruitful one because there are important points to derive from this field.

Burke presents a theory of the comic frame that makes the assumption that it is a useful political response, principally to othering, and one that, if adopted, might reply to or even curtail instances of scapegoating and violence (Burke 1969, Burke 1984 [1937]; Waisanen 2009; Desilet and Appel 2011). Burke (1984 [1937]) describes how order building relies on scapegoating and violence towards that scapegoat, something that Desilet and Appel describe as a 'tragic economy' (2011: 341). Burke proposes that the comic frame is a method of circumventing this cycle, as hateful responses are replaced through comic criticism and the satirical identification of mistakes rather than evil doing. This describes an undogmatic, political and cultural openness to other possibilities. It is a 'charitable attitude towards people' (1984 [1937]: 166), one that encourages an effort to have balance in human affairs (ibid: 167). Desilet and Appel elaborate this: 'the comic frame appears to offer the most promising attitude with respect to the desire to promote understanding and co-operation in human affairs' (2011: 342. original emphasis). Burke explains the impact of the comic frame as the addition of an amount of reflexivity to the political – 'the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting' (Burke, 1984 [1937]: 171. Original emphasis). This self-reflexivity is described by Burke as 'maximum consciousness' (ibid).

Burke is not discussing humor per se and the self-reflexivity he describes, although focusing on the identification of incongruity and ambiguity, does not rely on joking. He describes the comic frame as a political and satirical technique and is not proposing a universal theory of joking but rather a rhetorical strategy. There is little in Burke on whether the comic frame has multiple forms. Thus, it is easy to find examples of humor that do not fit the description of the comic frame offered by Burke, and my sample is one such example. Although this is not actually a theory designed for comic analysis but rather a theory of political preformativity, it is still difficult to apply when describing the meaning that might be generated by much disparagement humor. The anti-Semitic jokes of this study would appear not to be a response to the 'other' that is moving towards 'maximum consciousness'. The opposite appears true in this case. This can be illustrated through this violent racist joke:

What's the difference between boy scouts and Jews?  
Boy scouts come back from their camps.  
([www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html](http://www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html), no date).

Burke's ideas fail when applied to many readings of this joke. Rather than acting as a satirical response that circumvents scapegoating and allows the joker to enact a more developed, reflexive or critical form of consciousness, the opposite might even happen here for the receptive audience. The very scapegoating and violence that Burke sought the comic to work against is made light of in this joke. We have seen how the serious context of the website supports such scapegoating. Thus, it is clear that the comic can

move in more than one political or satirical direction and is not an ethical tool in all instances. That said, if the joke was presented in an ironic or even anti-racist discourse then Burke's ideas could be used to show how the comic is useful for showing the mistakenness of racism. That is an unlikely reading on [www.racist-jokes.info](http://www.racist-jokes.info). Here, the humor could be responded to through Burke's model and judged to be mistaken. Such an approach is not out of line with the reflexivity of much critical humor studies, or sociology more generally, although it is not intrinsic in such approaches. This is the key observation to be taken from this discussion.

One application of Burke, the incongruity analysis of Don J. Waisanen, does add to our tool kit for the rhetorical analysis of disparagement humor, if we maintain a critical view on the directions that humor can take. Waisanen (2009) outlines how the rhetoric of humor can reframe political discourse (ibid: 119) and offers three techniques that can be used for this purpose. These techniques are '(a) parodic polyglossia; (2) satirical specificity; and (c) contextual clash' (ibid). Waisanen uses these concepts to discuss the US satirists Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart. Although none of the humor on [www.racist-jokes.info/](http://www.racist-jokes.info/) can be described as sophisticated enough to display these processes, we can view disparagement humor more generally as something that can reframe or even redefine or support the 'reality' of the disparager. Such a comment echoes the earlier observation of William Fry, who stated that '[d]uring the unfolding of humor, one is suddenly confronted by an explicit-implicit reversal' (1963: 158 in Berger 1998: 5), that 'the reversal has the unique effect of forcing upon the humor participants an internal redefining of reality' (ibid). Here is a joke that can be used to highlight this point:

What do Jewish women make for dinner?  
Reservations!  
([www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html](http://www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html), no date)

This joke is not as severe or violent as some that appear on the website. It outlines a stereotype that US Jewish women lack domestic skills and must socialise. This joke might redefine or even define 'reality' for those visiting the site that have no knowledge of the stereotype. It might also buttress 'reality' for those who are aware of the stereotype. Such an approach also adds understanding to the notion that some of these Jewish jokes, and the one above is an example, could be used in different contexts for self-deprecation or even reversal of stereotypes. There are numerous examples of this in Jewish comedy. In communicative discourse, a joke may be inserted at points of tension in the discursive system, where a stereotype is under threat or in need of support. The US extreme right are certainly a group that believe in the existence of a threat to their culture, and would, no doubt, understand the potential hostility towards their use of racist stereotype. Such joking may offer a momentary, rhetorical support or cushioning. We can employ a Burkian perspective to understand how anti-Semitic joking, and other forms of racist or disparagement humor, employ types of incongruity to actively support race discourse, or racism, through reframing. We can also employ Burke's comic frame to criticise this use of humor as mistaken, offering a non-dialectical response.

#### **4 Humor and its rhetorical contexts**

This section details the importance of the writings of the social psychologist Michael Billig for an understanding of the connections between humor, laughter, ridicule and rhetoric. Billig's work is similar to Berger's in that it develops a broad rhetorical analysis although Billig diverges significantly from Berger because Billig is highly critical of humor and laughter. Billig's writings on humor can be split into two types. First, there are studies of the rhetoric that surrounds jokes, which employ the case study of jokes that appear on websites of the extreme right. Second, he examines the disciplinary function of humor and laughter. This second strand theorises the functions of humor in everyday contexts but does not collect or analyse empirical data. Both areas directly contribute to a rhetorical analysis of disparagement humor and will be elaborated in turn.

##### **4.1 The Meta-discourses of extreme humor**

Billig's approach is one that assumes the importance of both the context and history in which jokes emerge. He makes the vital point that violent jokes evoke a very different meaning dependant on the context in which they are told and the history to which they refer. This is illustrated by showing how violent jokes told about Black people in the US and about lawyers, although using similar depictions of violence, create very different meaning. Simply put, there is no history of anti-lawyer violence in the US (Billig 2002: 455). If violent relations exist, a very different rhetoric surrounds the joke and Billig proposes the humor can make light of this history. For example, Billig argues that '[l]ynching, which has played such a major part in the history of the Ku Klux Klan, is celebrated jokingly' (2001: 283). Here is an anti-Semitic joke from my sample that illustrates the point:

What's the difference between a Jew and a pizza?  
Pizzas don't scream when they are put in the oven!  
([www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html](http://www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html), no date).

This joke, from a website with connections to the extreme right, very simply reproduces, celebrates and reduces the seriousness of the violent history of anti-Semitism, in which Jewish bodies have been burnt. The joke presents this history for comic effect.

Billig has uniquely examined the 'meta-discourses' that surround the racist humor of the extreme right, as found on the joke websites, and argues that the meta-discourses of this humor work to justify it and evade criticism (Billig 2001). Billig shows how this meta-language has 'a complex and dissembling rhetoric' (ibid: 272). Violence is celebrated in humor, humor is defended as 'just a joke', while material violence is not recognised as a part of the history of the group. Billig examines the disclaimers that appear on such websites. He says 'the contrasts they evoke indicate what the fun is being contrasted with and, thereby, they offer indications about the nature of the bigot's pleasure' (ibid, 281).

Billig's work amounts to a discursive critique of the humor of the extreme right. It is through rhetorical distancing that the denial of the realities of extreme racism and its system of pleasure are presented. This section of Billig's work adds to the toolkit with which to examine the discourses that surround disparagement humor and could be

migrated to other contexts. A linked approach has been developed by Raúl Pérez (2013) which details the 'rhetorical performance strategies' that 'couch ethnic and racial stereotypes' (478) in contemporary stand-up comedy. Pérez records a number of strategies used by trainee comedians to make race based material acceptable. These are 'distance and denial strategies' (ibid) for white comedians and uncritical articulation of stereotypes for ethnic minority comedians, who are found to have greater licence in performing racist comedy. In the case of the anti-Semitic jokes in my sample, the context of the jokes is presented through the website links to organisations such as 'Golden State Skinheads' and 'Malevolent Freedom' both US based white nationalist organisations. These websites see ethnic and racial minority groups as the cause of social problems that disproportionately affect whites – a clear racist view – and use a variety of racial stereotypes to back this up. This mirrors the misperception of threat that accompanies much violent racism (Appadurai 2006). Although the discourses of these websites cannot be examined in depth here, Billig's thesis on meta-discourse informs the argument that these jokes sit in a clear racist context.

#### **4.2 Recognising laughter and unlaughter**

In other work, Michael Billig presents a universal theory of humor, arguing that it has a key role to play in the construction of discipline in all societies (2005: 237). Billig assumes that this discipline occurs through the ability of humor and laughter to be used as ridicule. He presents an interest in humor's 'darker side, and suggests that ridicule plays a central role in social life' (2002: 452). Billig goes on to propose that the disciplinary nature of humor connects it to social power relations – humor has a role to play in creating order through 'correcting' those that do not conform to social norms. (ibid: 237–8). This part of Billig's work is useful for the analysis of disparagement humor, and could be used especially in the ethnographic context. Through suggesting that humor is universally used as a method of ridicule, Billig is able to connect the serious and the humorous – 'humour and seriousness are necessarily linked. The world of serious meaning requires the disciplinary use of mockery' (2005: 242).

Erving Goffman is successfully adapted by Billig. Goffman sought to show how embarrassment is a social emotion and that joking often mitigated feelings of embarrassment to relieve tensions in social situations. Billig argues that this is too optimistic an account of joking and embarrassment, that it does not fully account for the disciplinary nature of humor (2005: 226). He argues that during the social faux pas, 'onlookers might be enjoying a momentary release from such an imperative, as they partake in the cruel pleasures of disciplinary humour' (ibid: 228). For Billig, much of the laughter that surrounds embarrassment is not consolatory but rather disciplinary. From this, we can argue that laughter that derives from disparagement humor also has a disciplinary potential – this is an essential point if Billig's theory is to be applied at all. One of the ways disparagement humor can disparage is through disciplining the butt of the joke in relation to 'normal' social convention, which is often an activity informed by stereotype. Here is an example from the sample:

What's the difference between a Jew and a canoe?  
A canoe tips!  
([www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html](http://www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html), no date).

In this joke the stereotype of Jewish miserliness is articulated. It is not difficult to see how in a racist discourse this joke seeks to discipline and ridicule Jewish people for the stereotypical behaviour, although of course other readings of the joke are possible. This method of reading the joke is closely linked to the superiority theory of humor – the idea that jokes seek to deride the butt of the joke – and Billig acknowledges this connection in his writing (Billig 2005).

An additional point argued by Billig is that there is a rhetorical potential in not laughing, or in unlaughter, as Billig describes it (Billig 2005: 175–199). Being laughed at can elicit embarrassment and lead to social discipline but not being laughed at, when a joke fails or is not understood, can also lead to social embarrassment and thus discipline. The act of laughing or not laughing is uniquely connected to power relations. This informs how the telling of disparagement humor might discipline the butt of the joke or lead to social approbation on the part of the joke teller. Although not testable in this article, the idea is a useful one for humor scholars examining jokes in ethnographic research. Overall, Billig’s work is useful but it does not either examine the semantic structure of the joke or account for humor that is not used as ridicule. These can be considered in the final section.

## **5 The rhetorical triangle and disparagement humor**

In the final section of this article, I outline some of my own assumptions on the rhetorical analysis of disparagement humor, particularly those informed by discourse analysis approaches. This is primarily focused on the assumption that Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle is a useful tool for analysis. Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle has been used by John E. Richardson in the development of a methodology for critical discourse analysis (Richardson 2006).

Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle is constructed of three parts: the dynamics of the speaker, the content of the material, and the audience reception, all of which work towards creating the rhetorical potential of the message (ibid: 151). This is a method used by Richardson for the discourse analysis of newspapers but it is equally applicable to the analysis of humorous discourse. The dynamics of a rhetorical triangle can be deconstructed to explain how meaning is created in discourse and specifically for us, in humor. Richardson discusses the description of the ‘mode of persuasion’ (ibid: 159) – these are the strategies and tropes used in discourse by the speaker. Here, Richardson is using a broad definition of what constitutes a rhetorical device, which moves beyond linguistic incongruity or metaphor. Such an approach aligns with all of the concepts that have been outlined in the article, particularly those concerned with the deconstruction of humorous incongruity as a meaning making structure. Inside any successful mode of persuasion will be evidence of ethos, pathos and logos (ibid: 160). The ethotic argument is key to presenting the (good) character of the arguer. An analysis of pathos is an analysis of the emotions that are generated by a text or speaker. Logos describes the logic or reasoning that is used to persuade the audience of the truth of a text (ibid).

Each of the elements of the mode of persuasion – ethos, pathos and logos – can be altered by three elements that determine the semiotic direction of the content of humor. First, there is the sign content of the joke, which can be made up of paradigmatic and syntagmatic parts (Berger 1998). The paradigmatic are the oppositions that may be presented in the joke (ibid: 5–7). These can be created by oppositional stereotypes,

contradictions or incongruities. They are a part of the sign content that can be reinforced by the rhetoric of the joke. There are also syntagmatic elements of a joke that need to be considered. This is the narrative structure of the joke that is broken in the making of an incongruity (ibid: 59). This observation is very similar to Palmer's description of premises, which are interrupted by his peripeteia. These factors are important to consider because they signal the meanings that might be diverted or supported in joking. Second, there needs to be a consideration of the wider connotations or connections to discourse through humor. Humorous incongruity is something that is exceptionally efficient at creating connotation, although not all connotations are humorous. As in any semiotic analysis, it is important to understand what is implied in the joke. At times, this can be information that exists outside of the explicit information provided by the two premises. Finally, there is a need to understand the structure of the humorous incongruity, which as discussed previously, is best done through Berger's typology. Different incongruities or combinations of rhetorical devices can help construct very different meanings.

All of this constructs the structure, content and context of a joke. In some jokes, certain parts of this analysis will be more relevant than others. This can be illustrated with the joke below.

What's the difference between Santa Claus and a Jew?

Santa Claus goes down the chimney.

([www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html](http://www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html), no date)

In describing the mode of persuasion used in the joke, we know that this is a website with associations to the extreme US right – this changes the ethos or character of the joker. For those concerned with racism, it points towards potential racist readings. The pathos generated by the joke is one that makes light of the genocide of Jewish people – again this conforms to an identification of racism. The logos of the joke – its logic – is one that is prejudicial. In this case a condoning of violence through humor. Moving on to the semiotic interpretation of the joke, the paradigmatic part of the joke is the opposing of the popular, quasi-Christian figure of Santa Claus to the Jew of the racist imaginary. Their meaning and fate are opposed. The syntagmatic is not that significant in this joke, and is best explained through the identification of tropes below. Before that, we can see the connotation of discourses outside the joke. It mentions Santa Claus and is thus told in a broadly Christian context. It makes light of the burning of Jewish people and thus connotes discourse of the extreme right. Finally, the rhetorical devices of the joke can be named. The syntagmatic or narrative of this joke is informed by these devices. The joke employs a simple joke structure that relies on definition, comparison and ridicule through violence. In this case comparison sets up the joke and leads it to the incongruity, definition and ridicule or disparagement are offered as a way of separating the two objects in the joke. The overall impression is to make light of violence. In this example, the reading presented is hypothetical but this is a method that could be used to test examples in an ethnographic context.

## **6 Conclusion**

The article has outlined and synthesised the various approaches to the rhetorical study of humor, joking, comedy and laughter. One of the aims is methodological – to provide a methodological toolkit through which others can familiarise themselves with rhetorical

humor analysis and add their own interventions. The theoretical aim has been to advance each of the approaches through an identification of their strengths and weaknesses, and thus to improve the robustness of rhetorical humor analysis as a form of critical humor theory that is especially useful for the analysis of disparagement humor. The focus of this special issue is the social consequences of disparagement humor. Through rhetorical humor analysis, we can begin to see the role of humor in convincing communication, as well as in frivolous communication. More importantly, we can see the role of frivolity in convincing communication. Rhetorical humor studies have a long history. I have argued for a return to a narrow, Aristotelian informed approach because it offers the clearest description of how humor can convince. Despite the age of some of the ideas, they rarely inform the content of articles on humor or in HUMOR, and thus the need to assert this method for mainstream consumption is evident.

To conclude this discussion I will revisit the key characteristics and limitations of each of the approaches, and reiterate how they can be employed with the most expediency and compatibility. First, the work of Jerry Palmer and Arthur Asa Berger is useful for its identification of the rhetorical structures of humor. Jerry Palmer (1987) begins by describing the semantic structure of humor and provides the first building block in the identification of the metaphorical structure of humor. Metaphors are communicative devices, thus so are instances of humor. What halts Palmer's contribution to the critical endeavour is the argument that humor and serious metaphor are different at the level of plausibility. Arthur Asa Berger builds on Palmer's initial identification of metaphor by adding a further forty-five tropes to our tool kit. Berger ultimately remains a teacher of comedians rather than a critical theorist but his work, with Palmer's, provide the tools with which to identify the structures of humor, and to speculate on the types of meaning those structures are likely to produce. This is important because certain devices lend themselves more easily to the creation of particular types of meaning. It is also essential to recognise humorous incongruity as a structure that has meaning making potential in itself.

Rhetorical analysis informed by Kenneth Burke was examined as an additional tool or unpacking the meanings that can be created by humorous incongruity, although some of these concepts are difficult to apply to the sample used in this article. Burke (1984 [1937]) is most significant as a thinker who foregrounds the political import of the comic frame. The comic frame is a political strategy that, for Burke, should be used to respond to some of the most significant of modern problems – scapegoating and violence. This provides a clear frame through which to evaluate the ethics of satire and, in terms of the analysis of disparagement humor, it is an approach that would ensure a clear movement away from any reductionism in the description of the intent of the speaker. Through this approach, the speaker remains mistaken on the nature of social reality rather than inherently racist. This is a theory that fits well with a discursive understanding of stereotypes, where they remain ambiguous forms of knowledge of a mistaken kind, rather than inevitable cogitative categories. Burke offers us a lens through which to view the grappling over 'reality' in the articulation of disparagement humor. The importance of an understanding of social context was addressed through the work of Michael Billig. His rhetorical analysis of humor has two strands. First, he shows how we are able to critique humor through an understanding of the contexts, and histories, in which racism emerges. Billig is excellent at unpacking the non-

humorous disclaimers that appear alongside joking. This is an approach that can be combined with an analysis of the structures of humor (via Palmer and Berger), which is a task that Billig does not perform. Billig also foregrounds the importance of ridicule in understanding what humor does, and how both laughter and unlaughter have rhetorical and disciplinary potential. This is essential for rendering critique at disparagement humor but it is not something that is readily popular in mainstream humor studies. This signals the intervention that critical humor studies can make, although we may wish to de-universalise this aspect of the toolkit.

Following those discussions, I outlined some ideas from my own rhetorical analysis of humor and added a number of points to the methodological toolkit. Aristotle's importance is again asserted and the rhetorical triangle of speaker, content and audience shown to be a tripartite consideration when examining the rhetorical potential or meaning of humorous discourse. This leads us to a consideration of the character of the arguer (ethos), the emotions generated (pathos) and the rationality of the content presented (logos). I then attached this to the earlier discussion of semantic structure and content to complete the methodological toolkit. I have asserted throughout the article that humor, akin to any communicative utterance, is polysemic. Far from ignoring this and offering dogmatic readings of race joking, or asserting the existence of racism in a simplistic fashion, rhetorical humor analysis has all of the theoretical flexibility to account for the polysemy of humor – at the core of it is an understanding of the semantic movement involved in humorous incongruity.

To conclude, it may not appear to be a grand statement to assert that disparagement humor might have the ability to convince and that a rhetorical analysis of humor can unpack this. That said, and as we have seen, there has been only a limited amount of critical rhetorical humor analysis. There is scope for much more. This article offers a summary and synthesis of the approaches. It is hoped that the ideas outlined might fuel debate and research on the usefulness of rhetorical humor analysis for the study of disparagement humor.

### Appendix 1: Berger's (1995: 54–55) list of forty-five humor techniques

<b>Technique</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Technique</b>	<b>Category</b>
1. Absurdity	Logic	24. Infantilism	Language
2. Accident	Logic	25. Insults	Language
3. Allusion	Language	26. Irony	Language
4. Analogy	Logic	27. Literalness	Language
5. Before/After	Identity	28. Mimicry	Identity
6. Bombast	Language	29. Mistakes	Logic
7. Burlesque	Identity	30. Misunderstanding	Language
8. Caricature	Identity	31. Parody	Identity
9. Catalogue	Logic	32. Puns, Wordplay	Language
10. Chase Scene	Visual	33. Repartee/Outwitting	Language
11. Coincidence	Logic	34. Repetition/Pattern	Logic
12. Comparison	Logic	35. Reversal	Logic
13. Definition	Language	36. Ridicule	Logic
14. Disappointment	Logic	37. Rigidity	Logic
15. Eccentricity	Identity	38. Sarcasm	Language
16. Embarrassment	Identity	39. Satire	Language

17. Exaggeration	Language	40. Scale/Size	Identity
18. Exposure	Identity	41. Slapstick	Visual
19. Facetiousness	Language	42. Speed	Visual
20. Grotesque	Identity	43. Stereotypes	Identity
21. Ignorance	Logic	44. Theme and Variation	Logic
22. Imitation	Identity	45. Unmasking	Identity
23. Impersonation	Identity		

## Appendix 2: Summary of approaches

Summary Author	Fundamental assumptions	Propositions	Uniqueness	Limitations
Jerry Palmer	<i>Humor is metaphorical in structure. The peripeteia is constitutive of the joke.</i>	<i>A humorous peripeteia is less 'plausible' than a metaphor.</i>	<i>Shows the important connection between humor and metaphor.</i>	<i>The argument that humor is less plausible than metaphor, if accepted, removes the scope for critical analysis.</i>
Arthur Asa Berger	<i>Rhetorical devices structure humor.</i>	<i>Rhetorical devices persuade people to laugh.</i>	<i>Provides a list of 48 rhetorical humorous devices.</i>	<i>Humor analysis remains uncritical.</i>
Kenneth Burke	<i>The comic can be used to respond to aggression. Through it, perceptions of mistakenness replace perceptions of evil</i>	<i>The comic can circumvent cycles of othering and violence.</i>	<i>Mobilises the comic as a political strategy.</i>	<i>Does not directly analyse humor and joking.</i>
Michael Billig	<i>Identifies the importance of history and context in meaning formation.</i>  <i>Laughter and unlaughter have rhetorical impact as ridicule.</i>	<i>Jokes are used to express and disclaim violence.</i>  <i>Laughter and unlaughter play a key role in social discipline</i>	<i>Identifies the meta-discourses that surround and justify humor.</i>  <i>Connects humor, discipline and power relations.</i>	<i>Does not examine the structure of humor and jokes.</i>  <i>Does not account for humor that is not used in ridicule.</i>

Simon Weaver	<i>The rhetoric of humor is formed through the rhetorical triangle (of speaker, audience and content).</i>	<i>The rhetorical triangle should be considered alongside the mode of persuasion.</i>	<i>Provides a method for the critical analysis of humor.</i>	<i>Presents hypothetical readings of humor.</i>
--------------	--	---	--	---

## References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 2006. *Fear of small numbers. An essay on the geography of anger.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. 1995. *Blind men and elephants. Perspectives on humor.* New Brunswick, NJ & London: Transaction Publishers.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. 1998. *An anatomy of humor.* New Brunswick, NJ & London: Transaction Publications.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. 2010a. *What's so funny about that?* *Society* 47. 6–10.
- Berger, Arthur Asa. 2010b. *Little Britain: An American perspective.* In Sharon Lockyer (ed.), *Reading little Britain. Comedy matters on contemporary television*, 171–181. London & New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Billig, Michael. 2001. *Humour and Hatred: The racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan.* *Discourse and Society* 12(3). 267–289.
- Billig, Michael. 2002. *Freud and the language of humour.* *The Psychologist* 15(9). 452–455.
- Billig, Michael. 2005. *Laughter and ridicule. Towards a social critique of humour.* London, Thousand Oaks, CA & New Delhi: Sage.
- Burke, Kenneth. 1969. *A rhetoric of motives.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Burke, Kenneth. 1984 [1937]. *Attitudes towards history.* 3rd edn. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Daniels, Roger & Spencer C. Olin Jr. 1972. *Racism in California. A reader in the history of oppression.* New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Desilet, Gregory & Edward C. Appel. 2011. *Choosing a rhetoric of the enemy: Kenneth Burke's comic frame, warrantable outrage, and the problem of scapegoating.* *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 41(4). 340–362.
- Eco, Umberto. 1986. *Semiotics and the philosophy of language.* London: Macmillan Press.
- Ford, Thomas E. & Mark A. Ferguson. 2004. *Social consequences of disparagement humor: A prejudiced norm theory.* *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8(1). 79–94.
- Goriunova, O. 2012. *New media idiocy.* *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 19(2). 223–235.
- Palmer, Jerry. 1987. *The logic of the absurd. On film and television comedy.* London: BFI Publishing.
- Pérez, Raúl. 2013. *Learning to make racism funny in the 'colour-blind' era: Stand-up comedy students, performance strategies, and the (re)production of racist jokes in public.* *Discourse and Society* 24(4). 478–503.
- Rattansi, A. 2007. *Racism. A very short introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Richardson, John. E. 2006. *Analysing newspapers. An approach from critical discourse analysis.* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Waisanen, Don J. 2009. A citizen's guide to democracy inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's comic rhetorical criticism. *Southern Communication Journal* 74(2). 119–140.

**Joke Website**

<http://www.racist-jokes.info/jewjokes.html> (no date) Racist Jokes, Jewish Jokes. [accessed on 24th March 2014].

**Bionote**

**Simon Weaver**

Simon Weaver is a Lecturer in Media and Communications in the Department of Social Sciences, Media and Communications at Brunel University London. He completed his PhD in the Department of Sociology, University of Bristol, with a thesis entitled *Humour, Rhetoric and Racism: A Sociological Critique of Racist Humour* (2007). Simon has published on racist humour in number of journals and in his book, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour* (2011: Ashgate). Address: Department of Social Sciences, Media and Communications, College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences, Brunel University London, Uxbridge, UB8 3PH, UK.