

5 Displaced Reference for Information: Jokes, Trauma, and Fables

Before turning to powerful particulars as ontologically expressive agents, I would like to look briefly at powerfully particular expressions within signification, conceived of as expressions of repressed or potential meaning—meaning that appears from below the bar of overt signification (thus being sublime, potential, or latent powers). In this chapter, I will describe three cases where evidence appears through literary and narrative devices in performative social space: jokes, fables, and the psychoanalytic theory of trauma (which is based on a notion of recursive time).

In each of these cases, literary-social genres play an important role in attributing meaning to an expression. Rather than the universal subsuming the particular in essentialist assertions, it is the universal that appears in the particular, though it is the assignment of statements to genres or normative contexts in the background that afford this. So, for example, unless we understand a set of statements as a joke, it is difficult to perform the surprise, or “witty,” elements of jokes; unless we understand events as traumatic events (following the psychoanalytic theory of trauma as deferred manifestation), then we simply have negative affective events in the past and/or aberrant behavior in the present; and unless we have a “once-upon-a-time” framework or some similar “as-if” structure common in fairy tales, then what we have is an imaginative story that is past. However, as I will argue, each of these performances also depends on the actualization of meaning in social space. (So, e.g., jokes are not “gotten” unless the listener is familiar with not only the cultural forms, but also the social functions, of a speech act.) They function not only as literary, but also as more broad social genres and devices.

Jokes

Jokes are usually not considered to be knowledge and/or information phenomena.¹ Their status as evidence is even derided as often prejudicial or in bad taste. This, however, is also partly why jokes usually belong in the realm of comedy rather than tragedy, for jokes are a type of expression that resolve in absurd figures of speech or reference.

Jokes often occur as descriptions of states of affairs. But these states of affairs exist in an unexpressed premise that appears in the process of the joke; jokes function like enthymemes. They are thus a special mixture of performance and representation combined. As noted in Sigmund Freud's famous 1905 book on jokes, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (Freud, 1989), jokes may be ways of asserting statements about people or events or more abstract states of affairs (e.g., stereotyped national, cultural, or gender dispositions) without speaking "directly" on the matter. In this, they also mark themselves as exaggerations, though with the caveat of all exaggerations, of course, that these exaggerations also claim to be pointing to states of affairs.

Here, I am interested in investigating how evidence is asserted through the ironic and performative nature of grammar in jokes. I am particularly interested in those jokes in which an "unconscious" or nonsyntactically normative meaning to a word or phrase appears as a surprise to the listener, and so may cause laughter by the performative perversion of normative meaning by the joke. In jokes, a perverse function of grammar plays a role in creating meaning, either through creating an odd meaning (via an ambivalent word or phrase) or by an odd reference. Like many of Freud's examples of jokes, I will concentrate on jokes characterized by wordplay.

Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* is notable not only for Freud's own lightheartedness and wit, but also because the third part of the book, that of a theoretical account of jokes, demonstrates a linguistic understanding of the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious. Specifically, jokes are presented in terms of semantic substitutions in scripts, linked by ambivalent terms and background premises. If, as Jacques Lacan famously said, the unconscious is structured like a language, then it is the genre of jokes that gives the impression that there exists such a thing as a

subliminal faculty of meaning—"the unconscious." The assumption of all three genres in this chapter—that there are "repressed" entities that are indirectly being referred to and retrieved—is made possible by techniques of grammar.

The sixth chapter of Freud's work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* sets up an analogy between jokes and dreams in terms of their basic mechanisms. The two basic mechanisms for jokes are those that, in his famous work published in 1900, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1980) had set out as the two basic mechanisms of the unconscious, as well, which he saw as evident in dreams: the *condensation of signification* from two or more terms and the *displacement of signification* from one signified to another, resulting in an indirect manifest representation of the reworked latent meaning of the dream so as to avoid both the "censorship" of the preconscious and the awakening of the sleeper. (Or, in the case of jokes, avoiding making direct embarrassing assertions that would "awaken" the listener to the speaker's prejudices, for example.)

Freud's comparison between dreams and jokes provide us with two very important understandings of jokes as meaningful events. First, the primary device for "unconscious" meaning to arise in a joke is a linguistic switch that links two or more scripts. Second, earlier in his book, in the third chapter, Freud distinguishes between non-tendentious and tendentious jokes: jokes that have as their primary purpose merely the release of a social or grammatical tension through the play of the joke itself (in Freud's terms, a release of cathartic energy) and those that have some more overriding purpose (e.g., to insult the listener or to malign some social group). In his comparison of jokes with dreams, inevitably the comparison leads to emphasizing tendentious jokes, since the very purpose of dreams for Freud is to rework difficult daily issues so that they may be made acceptable (to social taste, in the case of jokes).

Focusing upon jokes as linguistic play, I will examine some old jokes and ask how they can be analyzed as linguistic condensation and displacement, so that a nonnormative or "unconscious" utterance is released by the joke. (The "information" of the joke may be taken as this release of a "latent" into "manifest" or expressive content, and it may also be taken as the performative utterance itself—say, as socially indexing the speaker as a wit or comic.)

Our first joke goes as follows:

A man walks into a restaurant with a lobster and is seated. He says to the waiter, "I'd like to have my lobster for dinner." The waiter responds, "Would you like to have the lobster boiled or baked?" And the man responds, "Oh no, just bring him a steak."

This joke functions through the ambiguity of the term "to have" in the context of the joke's narrative. The normative or "major" meaning of "I'd like to have my lobster for dinner" would be that of eating the lobster. The "minor" meaning of "to have" in this context (i.e., to have as a dinner guest) as the dominant meaning, however, is revealed at the joke's end, namely, when the man asks the waiter to bring the lobster a steak to eat.

Like almost all linguistic jokes, the linguistic play revolves around multiple social norms for the use of its words (or as Wittgenstein called such language in use, "grammars"). If someone were not to understand the joke, then we would have to explain it by reference to the different grammars of "to have" as used in a restaurant context, and perhaps also, by an explanation of social norms in modern restaurant cultures. The element of surprise and amusement that we experience with this joke is a function of the minor script or grammar turning around the "joke device" of "to have," which has ambivalent senses and referents that are called to our attention by the joke.

Let us take another example, this time of a type of joke called insults or put-downs. Our example comes from a collection compiled by Louis A. Safian entitled *The Giant Book of Insults* (Safian, 1981). The insult is carried out by two successive clauses, the second which strengthens the first clause, but this time through a double entendre:

He's a confirmed liar—nothing he says is ever confirmed.

Here, "confirmed" plays two roles: that of stating identity via consistent intentional behavior by a person (as in English, "to be a confirmed bachelor") and "confirmed" in a second sense, the confirmation of statements by evidence. The play upon "confirmed" is so complex in this insult—since the second clause confirms the truth of the first clause, as well as plays on the meaning of the first's use of "confirmed"—that we may be left admiring the sophistication of the insult's rhetoric as much as the wit of its statement.

The evidential and indexical difference between insults and non-insult jokes is worth noting. Ultimately, the latter rely on shifts in socially premised situations that "switch" via ambiguity in language between two or

more grammatical scripts—for example, the situation of having a lobster as a dinner guest rather than as the meal. Insults may, too, occur through such rhetorical “switches,” but their ultimate indexical placement for evidence is upon the person making the insult, even as the insult is directed upon someone else. An insult is made by person x upon person y. For this reason, insults can also arise from subjective cynicism and/or feelings of superiority toward others. Ordinarily, jokes often have at least a surface neutrality that insults don’t have. Their wit is meant to put them at a distance from bold assertions of fact or even judgment. Insults do the opposite. Both, however, arise by the exaggeration of imagined or real states of affairs. Insults are made to intentionally hurt another person. A joke, not necessarily so.

Recalling our previous discussion of literature, we may note here the intersection of rhetoric and psychology in joking in the developmental line leading from joking to insults to outright hatred, using the case of the French author Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s writings between the two world wars. From a rhetorical perspective, the rather-amusing skepticism and cynicism (which can be seen as a form of joking involving irony) regarding the sadness of everyday life, militarism, and colonial capitalism in his 1932 novel, *Journey to the End of the Night* (2006) turns into the very mentally disturbed, vehement anti-Semitism of his four political pamphlets from 1937 to 1941, beginning with *Bagatelles pour un massacre*. In this transition, the index for “truth” becomes more and more located in the speaker’s locutions, even as such locutions recirculate well-known prejudices at the time and place of their expression. Joking turns evil as it valorizes the “minor premise” of a grammar rooted in not only exaggeration, but also hatred. The insecure self is “secured” by social prejudice and rhetorical elisions. Everyone is vile and idiots so that the self can be knowledgeable. What start off as exaggerations brought about by the author’s hysterical relations to the equally mad events around him eventually culminate in paranoid exclamations and their anti-Semitic materials, all utilizing streamed fragments taking the form of a rant.

If there were a rhetorical predecessor for political paranoia and hate speech in social network media today, such as on Twitter and from the highest levels of US politics, we would certainly have to look to Céline’s writings and their rhetorical forms and their psychological and political functions. Across his oeuvre, we can see the rhetorical method of joking progressing to narcissism, hatred, and ignorance, asserting the most vulgar

prejudices and hatred as fact in fragmentary and suggestive rhetorical forms. The purpose is not to avoid social bad taste, but to assert bad taste as the basis for knowledge and political reference, to enact a rhetoric of resentment and hatred as a state function, to replace institutional knowledge by “information”—prejudice—that everyone already “knows.” It builds a security state out of the mouths of insecure egos.

Sadly, these rhetorical strategies are as effective now in the mass media and political spheres as they were before the Second World War. As I write this, the US president takes such “joking” as the mainstay for knowledge and information, and so other such politicians in the United States and in other countries follow suit at his success. The “minor” premises of prejudice are asserted as the triumph of folk wisdom over knowledge institutions.

Trauma

If jokes involve a semantic play between major and minor premises and manifest and latent content, then trauma, by contrast, relies upon the reworking of semantic manifest content by a temporally earlier latent experience.²

Seen psychoanalytically, trauma is an experience that creates the language through which it is expressed, a language that is also formally “traumatic” in its rhetorical overdeterminations of meaning through unexpected schisms, breaks, and double references. The psychoanalytic concept of trauma, like the literary genres we have studied in the previous chapters and this one, is missing from documentation and information studies, at least in part due to the dominance of a social definition of information that connotes temporal immediacy in epistemic or sensory presence.

In contrast, Freud’s work is foundational in understanding the role of trauma as something informative through non-immediate after-affects (*Nachträglichkeit*),³ as a primary moment of the deferred informing of the real for the subject. According to the psychoanalytic theory of trauma, what experience gives us is evidence of what has happened in the past, coloring the empirical present.

Often, according to psychoanalytic theory, the traumatized subject seeks the proper container for trauma, which by definition exceeds the subject’s capacity to contain the traumatic event, and so the proper container is never found by the subject but instead is continuously displaced by the

subject's past experience now projected onto objects, people, and events. Evidence of the subject's trauma is always found by the subject, but in partial and displaced forms. The original index of trauma is marked in the subject's form of speech and traced in the displaced trails and trials of the subject's perceptions. Trauma informs the subjects and everyone else around them by continual displacements and irrational fixations of the subject. It announces itself as a referent not directly, but indirectly, by objects and events, and indeed by the subject him or herself, transformed into a symbol of traumatic expression. Trauma has a tragic structure, because the subject represents him or herself as driven by a historically formed will before and beyond them, which colors the future in terms of the original events.

One of the classic sources for this understanding of trauma can be found in Freud's 1920 discussion of war trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1961). In that book, Freud asks why it is that if dreams function as wish fulfillments do soldiers then reenact war traumas in their dreams. Freud's explanation is that the compulsion to repeat the trauma—in the literal forms of a dream or in the displaced forms of waking life—constitutes an attempt to master events that threaten or have threatened the subject.

According to all that follows from Freud's notion of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*), the status of documentary evidence here lies in the way that we can read back the trauma from the expressions, while also realizing that this reading back constitutes a reconstruction from the present, as well. Documentary evidence thus lies in an act of interpretation upon an absent or latent evidence that is nonetheless present in the manifest forms of expression, which itself colors the original event in an attempt to master it in the present. Only by the illogic of the subject's actions, by their overdetermination of signification upon the real, and, in short, by all the symptoms of neurosis applied to the subject's present actions, can we assert the affective force of a traumatic event and its literally informing inscription of the subject.

Beyond psychoanalytic interpretations proper, clinical practice continues to seek traumatic causes in neurotic actions according to theories of deferred affect. In the therapeutic setting, verbal discourse has been emphasized with adults, but in the case of children, objects have been suggested as being useful as vehicles for eliciting the expression and even the causes of trauma, and reenactment is seen as useful for both children and adults for therapeutic goals. Recently, affectively responsive and recording robots,

such as the robotic toy dog Therabot (Duckworth et al., 2015), have been added to the mix of tools for trauma reenactment. Such objects are claimed to allow the subject to express what he or she cannot express to another person or even to him or herself. Through the intermediary of an animal or, perhaps, even a toy animal, the subject is said to “gain a voice” to express (what is assumed to be) a real experience that is otherwise lost other than in displaced symptoms. The animal is thought to speak what the subject cannot say, and it is thought to say what the subject cannot bear being heard.

We must bear in mind, however, that traumatic expression conceived in this way is only possible if we accept deferred action as a psychological mechanism, with or without the formal psychoanalytical discourse from which the concept, and thus a notion of trauma as deferred action, historically have emerged. The theoretical construct of the past as something continuous, much less as something returnable, is an explanation that depends on narrative, historiographical, conventions. This isn’t to say that trauma doesn’t exist, but rather that its explanation, and possibly its experience, too, as after-affect, requires that psychological temporality be understood as continuous and durational and as explainable in terms of narrative conventions of temporal return from a durational past. The evidentiary structure of trauma can be found in ancient drama and philosophy, for example in Sophocles’s *Oedipus* trilogy or Plato’s theory of remembrance. Time must be seen as continuous in order for component parts to be retrieved from its series.

Fables

In the case of the psychological account of trauma, evidence is seen as simultaneously emerging from its sites of displacement and manifest absence.

As we have seen in this chapter, “information,” or evidence upon which we act, is not always seen as overt in its presence. In some genres of literature and psychology, information and evidence are seen as emergent through indirect symbolic or allegorical forms, and in the modern period by psychological displacements and overdetermined signs.

In fairy tales, folktales, and fables, allegory plays the role of creating hypothetical, “as-if” structures to events being narrated. These are representational stories, like we earlier analyzed in the case of the realist novel, though their “as-if” structures are obviously fantastic and their modeling is

thought to be largely “unconscious.” Various versions of the tale of “Little Red Riding Hood” have been recorded, all which seem to take the theme of a warning against deception. Such tales exist precisely in order to warn children of dangers in the world and suggest mechanisms for their safety. The imaginative tales and their allegorical, fantastic, and “once-upon-a-time” narrative structures give a form of information whose interpretation is meant to fluctuate in regard to empirical referents. Rather than being realist narratives, they are allegories whose expression is double: both manifest in the tale as it is told and latent in its actualization by the child in their encounter with the real.

If trauma is marked by the extension of the “as” into daily life, then fairy tales and other such stories of literature are meant to restore the “if” into present and future events. Rather than have referents that drive the subject, they are seen as giving an availability of an explanation to the subject in case they are needed or are specifically “triggered” by events. They are documents that give formal evidence in their “as-if” or allegorical structure of the difference that such stories possess between their materials and their actualization or “meaningfulness” in the real. They are documents because they give evidence *of* something, *as* something, but *as if* it were that thing, and their status as literature is verified by the literariness by which they show this activity in their very form.

Jacques Derrida, in his last seminar “The Beast and the Sovereign” (Derrida & Bennington, 2009), engages the question of what happens when information (say, political information) takes the form of fables, becomes “fabulous,” becomes *as* without the rhetorical devices of the “if” with fables or the manifestation of formal and performative literariness in literary presentations of fact:

What would happen if, for example, political discourse, or even the political action welded to it and indissociably from it, were constituted or even instituted by something fabular, by that sort of narrative simulacrum, the convention of some *as if*, by that fictive modality of “storytelling” that is called fabulous or fabular, which supposes giving to be known where one does not know, fraudulently affecting or showing off the making-known, and which administers, right in the work of the *hors-d’oeuvre* of some narrative, a moral lesson, a “moral”? . . . Well, given this, the fabulous deployment of information, of the teletechnologies of information of the media today, is perhaps only spreading the empire of the fable. What has been happening on big and small television channels for a few months now, but in particular in time of war, for example over the last few

months, attests to this becoming-fabulous of political action and discourse, be it described as military or civil, warlike or terroristic. A certain effectivity, a certain efficacy, including the irreversible actuality of death, are not excluded from this affabulation. Death and suffering, which are not fabular, are yet carried off and inscribed in this affabulatory score. (pp. 35–36)

Like in our analysis of jokes, we see here Derrida discussing the politically efficacious use of genres of evidence based on performances of sublime content. Political choices are mostly made by “unconscious” affective premises and politicians’ appeals to such through enthymemic rhetorical devices. (Today, for example, through social media memes.) Here, the problem is that of applying genres that have hypothetical, “as-if” rhetorical forms, to situations where the applications are not allegorical, but real, not hypothetical, but causal. This transformation of social space into being a fable both destroys the specificity of the fable (not least as a children’s genre), and also transforms the real into a real of constant crisis. The warning of the fable becomes the reality of a politics of not only crisis, but also make-believe.

As “once upon a time,” as an “as-if” narrative, the fable is a guide and a lesson, and its indexical location lies between its being told and experienced. It arises from an oral tradition, not a written one. Its inscription remains in orality even when it is written. And it remains oral when it is read to a child. It remains a potentiality to appear, not a possibility that logically unfolds. Like realist fiction, it is a model, but a model that instructs through allegory.

A reality that is a fable is a reality of crisis. Is it a present that informs us as a warning allegory, whose evidence lies in a literary form.

Informational Fragments

In each of the genres that we have examined in this chapter, of jokes, traumas, and fables, what we see are fragments acting as evidence of experience. They are organized so as to produce or create surprise or lessons about experiences still to come. They suggest, they model. Indexical signs appear out of grammatical ambivalence and reversals, manifestations of latent content in time and latent content subject to time, and hypothetical tales that result in warnings and lessons about future experiences.

These genres have analogues in new media, which also bridges literary forms and experience. Fragmentary documents, such as on Twitter, make

high use of contextual situations and immediate rhetorical content within them. The massively increased speed of transmitting documents, largely as small communicative rather than argumentative “fragments” through social media and the Internet, create shock waves upon waves of news fragments, which jar the temporality of everyday attempts to organize psychological and phenomenological consistency and a “private life,” as we used to say. This state of “total mobilization,” as Maurizio Ferraris (2013) has wittily put it, has given us a means for composing our subjectivity as the recomposition of “objective” documentary fragments according to “unseen” grammars of ideology and politics that provide and organize for us “our” world.

The role of the fragment and its ordering as sense by technical systems (e.g., social network algorithm and machine learning) in interaction with ideological horizons and popular needs continues the sociotechnical problematic of writing, now in a highly sped-up communicative and streaming archival setting (Ferraris, 2013). As a documentary fragment, its representational fragility becomes more acute, subject to extreme context variability and vagaries of rhetorical manipulation over time and audience spaces. In this, references—even what were thought of as facts—become more subject to communicative flow over time, spun like pebbles by the waters of different senses of the self and the world, mediated by political economy. On the one hand, the documentary fragment is simply the sped up and manifest showing of the communicative trails that have led to the modern conception of “information.” On the other hand, as such, it has also broken away from some of the traditional institutional and genre bonds that in modernity have separated knowledge from information (such as peer review in scholarly communication and academic libraries as trusted collections of reviewed works).

In early modernity, documentary knowledge institutionally, pedagogically, and through method, separated from ordinary communicative information through the establishment of rigorous methods and institutions for scholarship and science. Today, as in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe, disruptive technologies and popular discontent with old-knowledge institutions have allowed “information” of all sorts and forms to constitute public forms of “knowledge” for ordinary people and, even at times, for scholars. Unsurprisingly, prejudice and false facts are part of this breadth of information. Later in this book, we will return to these themes.

In the next chapter, however, I would like to shift from signs as primary mediators for powers of expression, to a view of ontological particulars as agents for their own powers that lead to rights of expression. In contrast to Suzanne Briet's (1951, 2006) example of a newly discovered animal being indexed by its capture and classification, we will turn toward a consideration of the particular animal entity in terms of its own dispositional powers that can manifest as contributors to self-indexing in both worlds of other entities and worlds of signs. In the next chapter we will be interested in the social rights given to ontological "powerful particulars" (to borrow Rom Harré's phrase) to be, at least to some degree, self-evidential in science, ethics, and law.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/11719.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11719.001.0001)

Documentarity

Evidence, Ontology, and Inscription

By: Ronald E. Day

Citation:

Documentarity: Evidence, Ontology, and Inscription

By: Ronald E. Day

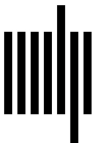
DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/11719.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11719.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262356022

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2019

Publication of this open monograph was the result of Indiana University's participation in TOME (Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem), a collaboration of the Association of American Universities, the Association of University Presses, and the Association of Research Libraries. TOME aims to expand the reach of long-form humanities and social science scholarship including digital scholarship. Additionally, the program looks to ensure the sustainability of university press monograph publishing by supporting the highest quality scholarship and promoting a new ecology of scholarly publishing in which authors' institutions bear



The MIT Press

© 2019 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND license. Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



Publication of this open monograph was the result of Indiana University's participation in TOME (Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem), a collaboration of the Association of American Universities, the Association of University Presses, and the Association of Research Libraries. TOME aims to expand the reach of long-form humanities and social science scholarship including digital scholarship. Additionally, the program looks to ensure the sustainability of university press monograph publishing by supporting the highest quality scholarship and promoting a new ecology of scholarly publishing in which authors' institutions bear the publication costs.

Funding from Indiana University made it possible to open this publication to the world.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Jen Jackowitz. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-0-262-04320-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1